

Not Your Mother's Library Transcript

Episode 39: Holiday Traditions

(Brief intro music)

Rachel: Hello, and welcome to Not Your Mother's Library, a readers' advisory podcast from the Oak Creek Public Library. I'm Rachel.

Mary: And I'm Mary.

Rachel: Somehow it is already November, a month which marks the early onset of winter. At least, here in the upper Midwest. Winter spells 'holiday season' as well as a break for the podcast. It's true: This is our last episode of the year, but we have many reading recommendations to keep you busy over the next few months. Now, I myself am not huge into celebrating Christmas or any other number of Yuletide holidays. I tend to save all my energy for Halloween, and then that fizzles out along with the sugar-high. (laughs) However, I do like to drink hot chocolate just as much as the next person, and I know that my co-host loves Christmastime. Don't ya, Mary?

Mary: I love any holiday that you can decorate for. And, don't worry, while the podcast is on a holiday break, you can still hear from us on our socials for those sweet recommendations and ideas. Jake from the Children's Department and I are cooking up some holiday fun on Instagram and YouTube that you don't want to miss.

Rachel: We figured it would be *joyeux* to talk about holiday traditions, not to mention give all of you listeners some interesting reading recommendations. Without further ado, let the jingle bells commence!

[jingle bells sound effect]

Mary: I'm going to be controversial here for my first pick: Is this a Christmas story, or does the story just happen to be set around the holiday? It's the timeless Die Hard Dilemma.

Rachel: (laughs)

Mary: I'm going to say it is a Christmas story and recommend James Patterson's "The 19th Christmas." For those of you who have read James Patterson, this title is part of the "Women's Murder Club" series. If you haven't read this series, this book can be read as a standalone, and you'll enjoy it just as much. It follows Detective Lindsay Boxer and her friends in the Women's Murder Club. In the month of

December, crime is down. It feels as if even the courts are showing some Christmas spirit. The news cycle is so slow that journalist Cindy Thomas is on assignment to tell a story about the true meaning of the season for San Francisco. Then a criminal known only as 'Loman' seizes control of the headlines. He is planning a deadly surprise for Christmas morning. He has commissioned dozens of criminal colleagues to create distractions so his crimes will be harder to solve—a very supervillain move. All that Lindsay and the San Francisco Police Department can figure out is that Loman's greed—or money, for bloodshed, for attention—is limitless. Solving crimes never happens on schedule, but as this criminal mastermind unleashes credible threats by the hour the month of December is upended for the Women's Murder Club. Avoiding tragedy is the only holiday miracle they ask for.

Rachel: (laughs)

Mary: Now, if you are a fan of crime and Christmas and cake, "Christmas Cake Murder" by Joanne Fluke is going to be your new favorite book. When Hannah moves to Lake Eden, Minnesota, she finally begins to realize her dream of opening her own bakery, The Cookie Jar. She starts to get into the groove of this new town and agrees to help out with a Christmas Ball that will honor a local woman in hospice care, Essie Granger. When Hannah spends more time with Essie, she discovers what she thinks is a talent for storytelling. She begins to realize that the notebooks full of handwritten 'crime fiction' she found may not be fiction at all. Can she solve this new mystery and prevent a Christmas disaster? This happens to be the second book in the series; if you would like to read the first one, "Raspberry Danish Murder" is all yours.

Rachel: Yes, it's getting colder.

Mary: From all the cold-blooded murder.

Rachel: Ugh... But when does winter actually begin? It depends where you live. The winter solstice is the longest night of the year. In the Northern Hemisphere where we are, that'll be around December 21st. The Southern Hemisphere won't see it happen until June 21st, because that's how astronomy works! North and South Poles make everything topsy-turvy. Anywhoosle, an article written by The Good Trade tells us the following. [speaks in an old-timey English accent] "Throughout history, societies across the world have held festivals and ceremonies marking winter solstice, the day of the 'sun's rebirth.' Most often, winter solstice celebrations honored the symbolism of fire and light, along with life, death, the rising sun, and the moon." [laughs breathlessly and resumes speaking in a normal voice] Examples include Saturnalia and Yule, but there are others. I quite like the idea of solstices because they're not

directly tied to any single religion, meaning that they can be enjoyed by everyone. It is also worth noting that many contemporary holiday traditions were borrowed from ancient solstice celebrations. If you are interested in helping your kids learn about this special time of year, I recommend “The Shortest Day: Celebrating the Winter Solstice” by Wendy Pfeffer. It “describes how and why daylight grows shorter as winter approaches, the effect of shorter days on animals and people, and how the winter solstice has been celebrated throughout history.” There are illustrations throughout, and the author saw fit to include some easy, science-based activities to engage young readers. Another great non-fiction book for children is “The Winter Solstice” by Ellen Jackson. This title “presents facts and folklore about the shortest day of the year, a day that has been filled with magic since ancient times.” I enjoyed it because of the illustrations by Jan Davey Ellis, which are reminiscent of Jan Brett’s iconic work. If you’re more interested in celebrating the solstice as an adult, I recommend “The Return of the Light: Twelve Tales from Around the World for the Winter Solstice” by Carolyn McVickar Edwards. It is an older-ish book—published in 2000—and there aren’t many copies available in the library system, but I’m suggesting it because it is so comprehensive. The storyteller includes tales “from North America, China, Scandinavia, India, Africa, South America...and Polynesia.” It’s usually a good sign when populations that aren’t just from the U.S. and Europe are included in the mix, wouldn’t you say?

Mary: Of course, we want to know how everyone celebrates the winter holidays! Something that too many people can relate to is being out of a job around this time. This is what happened to Carmen in “The Christmas Bookshop” by Jenny Colgan. She ends up having to move in with her sister, Sofia, who has another baby on the way and reluctantly accepts Carmen’s help. She is tasked with helping this small, struggling book shop to get its head above water and thrive just in time for the holidays. She finds that she is not only helping the store but the store is helping her in more ways than she expected. Continuing in the spirit of hard work paying off in festive ways, the novella “The Santa Suit” by New York Times bestselling author Mary Kay Andrews follows newly divorced Ivy Perkins as she purchases an old farmhouse full of junk. The previous owners left so much to clear out that now Ivy now has a full-time job in organizing and purging all the miscellaneous stuff. However, at the top of a closet, Ivy finds a vintage Santa suit with a note in the pocket from a little girl with a Christmas wish: for her father to come home from war. Now it is Ivy’s mission to find out who made this wish and if it ever came true. Her quest forces her to head out into the community looking for answers when she just wanted to be left alone in the aftermath of heartbreak. She finds a welcoming town and maybe even a second chance at love. What more could you ask for in a winter story?

Rachel: When I think 'winter', I think of the cold and the snow. And what place is really cold? Well...

Mary: Scandinavia!

Rachel: Yeah. (laughs) We're talkin' Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Norway, Iceland...you're shivering just thinking about 'em, aren't ya?

Mary: Yup.

Rachel: Scandinavia is where traditions such as the Yule log come from, but did you know that it is also the homeplace of evergreen decoration? What about hanging mistletoe? Even the Norse God Odin is said to be the original ideation of Father Christmas given his long white beard and wandering nature. To learn more, I heartily recommend the book "Have a Cool Yule: How-to Survive (and Enjoy) the Mid-winter Festival" by Mélusine Draco. She covers all sorts of rites and ceremonies, both from the old world and more contemporary neopaganism. For readers who want something less spiritual and more cultural, try "The Nordic Baking Book" by Magnus Nilsson. This guy has a fantastic name, and it turns out he has been featured in the television series "The Mind of a Chef" and "Chef's Table" on Netflix. Let me ask you a question, Mary: What are holidays for if not for cookies?

Mary: [deadpan] No idea.

Rachel: Well, this book has got your cookies...plus cakes, pastries, breads, and every other baked good under the sun. There are 450 recipes in total. If you don't like hanging around in kitchens but still want to make good use of your hands, I recommend "Stitch Mountain: 30 Warm Knits for Conquering the Cold," written by Laura Zander. The model on the cover of this book is wearing what could be described as a hideous fuzzy scarf while gazing at the reader rather seductively. I love everything about it. Inside, though, is a "beautiful collection of cozy, cold-weather knitwear inspired by snowy mountain landscapes and the skiers and snowboarders who have conquered their slopes." These stylish garments include "hats, headbands, cowls, mittens, scarves, and sweaters." If you are like me and vastly unskilled when it comes to textiles, instead try "Natural Tables: Nature-inspired Tablescapes for Memorable Gatherings" by Shellie Pomeroy. This one is perfect for the holidays. It reminds me of Hygge, which is a Danish and Norwegian concept encompassing a feeling of comfort, warmth, and general coziness. "Natural Tables" blends this idea with Swedish minimalism to create truly beautiful tableaux. The book includes style tips for picking themes and color palettes as well as simple recipes to fill the dishes at your table.

Mary: Hygge is the best aesthetic! It's what makes me crave fall and winter, honestly. I'm going to jump into the fantasy realm here with my next pick, "Krampus: The Yule Lord" by Brom. Krampus in this novel is a child of Loki—the Norse god of mischief—and is the spirit of Yule. One Christmas Eve in Boone County, West Virginia, songwriter Jesse intervenes when he sees men in black attacking a white-bearded gent in a sleigh.

Rachel: Huh,

Mary: Yeah, it's Santa.

Rachel: (laughs)

Mary: But he's the bad guy.

Rachel: Wha-?

Mary: According to Krampus, an age-old trickster demon who punishes wrong-doing, Santa locked him up and stole his magic 500 years ago. When Jesse suddenly finds the gift his daughter has been asking for in Santa's left-behind sack, Jesse's wife accuses him of stealing, and this is when the belsnickels hunt him down. It's not your average holiday tale, but you're in for a crazy sleigh ride. If you're interested in learning more about traditional Krampus, you might want to check out "The Krampus and the Old, Dark Christmas: Roots and Rebirth of the Folkloric Devil" by Al Ridenour. Because of the contemporary depictions of Krampus in movies, television shows, and even greeting cards, Ridenour delves into the medieval folklore that started it all. He provides information on how different the holiday traditions were in these hard times—stories of monsters disemboweling naughty children, saints that were murderers, plays put on by the churches that included the anit-Christ and the devil. If you're into spooky and dark origins, this is the book for you.

Rachel: In the UK—most notably England—Christmas is a time for telling ghost stories. Take Charles Dickens's "A Christmas Carol." It is chock-full of ghosts and supernatural shenanigans. Classic, creeping horror is more my speed, anyway, so I have some awesome recommendations for you. First is a short story written by Susan Hill entitled "The Woman in Black." Yes, I know there are movies and plays based on this work, but you absolutely must read it, too. The work purveys a sort of undiluted horror that reminds me of Shirley Jackson's "The Haunting of Hill House." It's unnerving. And, really, it is written in an interesting way. The story starts off with a family sharing ghost stories on Christmas Eve. The man of the house, a retired lawyer named Arthur Kipps, is asked by his step-children to take part. He tries to

laugh it off and say he isn't interested, but they keep egging him on until eventually he's like 'Ya know what? The story I have to tell is too dang scary for ya'll.' Thusly, he yeets himself on out of there to go and be all broody. Arthur later comes to the conclusion that though he is unable to tell his tale to others, he is going to write it all down as a way of exorcising his inner demons. The story he writes is of the Woman in Black. If that isn't the best way to start a spooky story...by saying that's it's too horrific to handle? All right. I'm hooked. Sign me the heck up. So, Arthur reminisces about when he was first starting out as a lawyer and was sent out to settle the estate of one deceased Mrs. Alice Drablow. Drablow lived at Eel Marsh House, which is an old manor home located beyond a causeway that gets cut off from land whenever the tide comes in. Talk about isolation. Add in a healthy dose of fog and some mysterious noises coming from the surrounding moor, and you've got yourself a haunted house. I won't expose more of the plot for fear of spoilers, but trust me, Arthur's situation escalates. If you're in the mood for more old-school scares while cozying up in front of a crackling fire, my go-to recommendation is M.R. James. Though he was definitely a product of his time, this writer is still renowned for being a master of his craft. His most popular tale is probably "A Warning to the Curious," which is about digging up buried secrets. Literally. I also highly advise listening to a podcast that will exceed all your needs for chilling horror. "Shadows at the Door" is based out of England, and its hosts specialize in "bringing to life a collection of macabre tales and spirited debate. Drawing on the haunted landscapes of classic folk horror, the podcast lifts the veil on some of your favourite ghost stories, and presents new fables throughout a series of...audio dramas. [It] artfully showcases the unsettling, the unearthly, and the uncanny, with new tellings of beloved ghost stories, and spectral yarns created exclusively for the podcast by some of the most exciting writers in modern horror." They actually dramatized "A Warning to the Curious" and did a special "Drunk Ghost Stories" episode of "The Woman in Black" that are both one hundred percent worth listening to on a dark and snowy night, perhaps with a cup of mead.

Mary: If you like Christmas ghost stories, I'll do you one better with a Christmas ghost story with time travel to the Victorian era.

Rachel: Ooh!

Mary: My next pick is "Ballgowns & Butterflies," a novella by Kelley Armstrong. This title is part of a short series, "A Stitch in Time," but you can certainly read it as a stand-alone story. But I definitely encourage you to read the whole thing. It's a wonderful story about a Canadian professor who is plunged into the Victorian era through a portal in her childhood bedroom which happens to be in a manor in the North Yorkshire Moors. She gets to experience her first Victorian Christmas and maybe

even a ball. The protagonist, Bronwyn, is in touch with the spiritual world and has seen ghosts on both sides of the time portal. Will she have a murder to solve among the Christmas festivities? You'll have to read it for yourself; I won't spoil it. This story highlights the differences between Victorian holiday traditions and modern ones. If you would like to check this title out from the Milwaukee County system, you can find it in "Under a Winter Sky: A Fantasy Holiday Anthology." To quote the blurb, "Five powerhouse authors of fantasy and urban fantasy bring you a feast of romantic midwinter holiday adventures. These heartwarming and pulse-pounding tales celebrate Hanukkah, Christmas, the solstice, Yule—and holidays from worlds beyond our own. With fancy-dress balls, faery bargains, time travel, blood sacrifice—"

Rachel: Ooh!

Mary: "—and festive cocktails, these stories will delight lovers of fantasy and romance with a dash of seasonal joy." Now, if you're not hooked by that, I don't know what else to say.

Rachel: Thanks for tuning in to today's episode. Remember that we will be back in the new year with fresh recommendations. In the meantime, you could go back and listen to some of your favorite episodes or catch up on those you haven't had a chance to hear yet. Please remember to check the show notes for a list of everything we just mentioned, as well as related links. Please subscribe and rate the podcast if you like what you hear. Remember to reach us through the Oak Creek Public Library website or Facebook page by messaging @OakCreekLibrary. Until next time, happy reading.

Mary and Rachel: Bye!

(Brief outro music)

Rachel: First is a short story written by Susan Hill entitled "The Woman in Black." (mumbles unintelligibly) Is how that came out.

Mary: (mumbles) *The woman in black*.