

## Not Your Mother's Library Transcript

### Episode 43: Books about Books

(Brief intro music)

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

Rachel: And I'm Rachel.

Mary: For this episode, we're going to pay homage to National Library Week which is April third through ninth by making recommendations that feature libraries. I'm sure more than a few of us are in love with and fascinated by our local library. I know growing up my local library was my favorite place to be. Even though it was small, it was where I went to Girl Scouts, where I went to story time, and where I got to check out as many books as I could carry. As I got older, it was a quiet space where I could do my homework without interruptions, a safe place to meet up with my friends, and, eventually, my career choice. I might be biased saying this, but the best job in the world is being a librarian. Now, let's get into some recommendations!

Rachel: My first recommendation is "The Book of Speculation" by Erika Swyler. Not only does it have an intriguing name, it's also filled with magical realism. This genre is kind of strange. The story takes place in reality, but just a hint of surreal elements are mixed in to spice things up. For whatever reason, my high school was crazy about all things 'magical realism', so in English lit. we read "The House of the Spirits," "The Wind-up Bird Chronicles," "Love in the Time of Cholera"—all those classics. These stories have always made me feel uneasy, as though something weren't quite right. But that same uneasiness is also what propels me to keep reading. So, "The Book of Speculation" starts out normal enough. "Simon Watson, a young librarian on the verge of losing his job, lives alone on the Long Island Sound in his family home—a house perched on the edge of a bluff that is slowly crumbling toward the sea." Okay, that's fine. Totally normal. A lot of seaside houses are starting to suffer the effects of climate change—big whoop. But there's more: "[Simon's] parents are long dead, his mother having drowned in the water his house overlooks." Bit freaky, though people do drown. However, "His younger sister, Enola, works for a traveling carnival reading tarot cards, and seldom calls." Um...you know what? Circuses exist! Strange and unlikely to have 'tarot reading' as your profession, but not impossible. Let's keep going: "On a day in late June, Simon receives a mysterious package from an antiquarian bookseller. The book tells the story of Amos and Evangeline, doomed lovers who lived and worked in a traveling circus more than

two hundred years ago. The paper crackles with age as Simon turns the yellowed pages filled with notes, sketches, and whimsical flourishes; and his best friend and fellow librarian, Alice, looks on in increasing alarm. Why does his grandmother's name, Verona Bonn, appear in this book? Why do so many women in his family drown on July 24? Could there possibly be some kind of curse on his family—and could Enola, who has suddenly turned up at home for the first time in six years, risk the same fate in just a few weeks? In order to save her—and perhaps himself—Simon must try...to decode his family history while moving on from the past.” Fair do’s: curses are, in fact, not real. Much as I sometimes wish I had the power to place hexes on my enemies, that is a purely fantastical conjuration.

Mary: Says you.

Rachel: (laughs) But boom! There we have the magical realism! Maybe most people wouldn’t open an ancient tome that gets sent to them by a suspicious character, but I am here to confirm that a librarian definitely would. Afraid I can’t tell you much more about “The Book of Speculation” without risking spoilers, but I will say that even though Simon turns me off with his incessant whining, I do like that the story is told across two time periods: present day, and the 1700s when Amos and Evangeline were the stars of the show. If you need a readalike, pick up a copy of “The Department of Rare Books and Special Collections” by Eva Jurczyk. This isn’t magical so much as mysterious. The tagline reads: “What holds more secrets in the library: the ancient books shelved in the stacks or the people who preserve them?” Basically, a rare manuscript goes missing at an academic library, and a young librarian has to figure out which one of her colleagues did the dirty deed.

Mary: Because the library is such a magical place, it stands to reason that there are so many books to recommend in the fantasy genre. My first pick is “The Midnight Library” by Matt Haig. This book has been very popular on social media, and for a good reason. The story really hits close to home for a lot of people. I think we’ve all wondered how our lives would have been different if we had made a different choice. What if you had gone to a different school? Applied for a different job? Picked a different house or apartment to live in? Picked a different dog at the rescue? This book toys with the idea that if you could see how your life would have been had you made these different choices, would you change it? Nora Seed is faced with this dilemma. Beyond the edge of the universe is a library that contains an infinite number of books, each containing the story of another reality. One book has the story of how your life is now, and another shows how your life could have been if a different path was chosen. Nora wanted to be a glaciologist. She wonders what would’ve happened if she had stayed with an old partner. As she travels through the Midnight Library, she has to decide what is important in life. What makes it

worth living in the first place? A readalike is “The Invisible Library” by Genevieve Cogman. In this book, the Library—capital L—harvests fiction from different realities. Irene is a spy who has been assigned to an alternate version of London. Her mission is to retrieve a dangerous book, but when she and her assistant arrive, it’s been stolen by someone else!

Rachel: Oh, no!

Mary: To add to their trouble, this world is full of chaos. The laws of physics and natural law do not apply here. Supernatural creatures and magic are everywhere. Kai, Irene’s assistant, is also hiding something. She can’t afford to fail at her mission if the nature of reality is at stake. Get ready for a steampunk, Victorian, fantastical adventure!

Rachel: I promise you, listeners, that I did not pick my next book based upon its title, because I’m simply not that edgy. (laughs) “The Unkindness of Ravens” by M.E. Hillard is the first in the “Greer Hogan Mystery” series. It sounds so goth, doesn’t it? Well, it isn’t, really. “Greer...is a librarian and an avid reader of murder mysteries. She also has a habit of stumbling upon murdered bodies. The first was her husband's, and the tragic loss led Greer to leave New York behind for a new start in the Village of Raven Hill. But her new home becomes less idyllic when she discovers her best friend sprawled dead on the floor of the library. Was her friend's demise related to two other deaths that the police deemed accidental? Do the residents of this insular village hold dark secrets about another murder, decades ago? Does a serial killer haunt Raven Hill? As the body count rises, Greer's anxious musings take a darker turn when she uncovers unexpected and distressing information about her own husband's death...and the man who went to prison for his murder. She is racked with guilt at the possibility that her testimony may have helped to convict an innocent man. Though Greer admires the masters of deduction she reads about in books, she never expected to have to solve a mystery herself. Fortunately, she possesses a quick wit and a librarian's natural resourcefulness.” Thank you very much! “But will that be enough to protect her from a brilliant, diabolical murderer?” You know me, Mary: I love my murderers brilliant and diabolical. If you are a fan of Louise Penny’s “Chief Inspector Armand Gamache” series or Dorothy Sayers’ “Lord Peter Whimsey,” then I suggest trying out “The Unkindness of Ravens.” There are already two other books available: “Shadow in Glass” and “Three Can Keep A Secret,” the latter of which was published just a couple of months ago. Fly, my pretties!

Mary: My next two picks are not strictly about the library, but the protagonists would be lost without it. This next recommendation does need a trigger warning for pregnancy loss. In the “Daughters of the

Lake” by Wendy Webb, Kate has been dreaming of a woman for the past three weeks. She has been dreaming so vividly that while she’s asleep it feels as if she really is this woman. When a body washes up on the lakeshore, she’s confronted with the impossible: it’s the same woman. How could this be? How did she know that the woman wasn’t alone? That there was a baby wrapped carefully in the folds of the woman’s gown when her dad and the sheriff had both missed it? How are the bodies perfectly preserved and wearing clothes that were made almost a century ago? The mystery starts in the past when a story of true love is tragically cut short. After finding herself a suspect in this investigation because she inexplicably knows too much, Kate ends up at the local library searching through newspapers and researching how the town would have been different when this mystery woman had lived. Her use of the library is crucial for convincing law enforcement that she is not out of touch with reality and not responsible for the demise of this woman and child. Local myths, soul mates, jealousy, ghosts, and heart-breaking loss are beautifully intertwined in this must-read. I’ve already made Rachel add this book to her TBR list.

Rachel: Yes, she has.

Mary: A story with a similar feel is “The Lost Apothecary” by Sarah Penner. This is another book that has become popular thanks to hashtag BookTok. Caroline was supposed to be enjoying a romantic vacation in London for her tenth wedding anniversary with her husband. That is, before she found out he was cheating on her.

Rachel: (clicks tongue and gasps)

Mary: Deciding to go on the trip alone, she takes this time to try to find herself again. What does she really like to do? Now that she is no longer trying to start a family, is security really what she needs from a job? Or is it time to follow her passions and pick up on the career that she left for a more stable job? While she’s trying to figure out her next chapter, she’s persuaded to go digging in the mud of the Thames with a group of hobbyists. There, she finds something that will kickstart her love of mystery: She finds an apothecary vial that is over two hundred years old. In February 1791, Nella is waiting for her next customer. Despite being a respected healer for most of her life, she’s changed her rules. Now, she deals in poison.

Rachel: Oo!

Mary: She has two very clear rules: Number one: The poison must never be used to harm a woman and number two: the name of the customer and the intended victim must be recorded in the register. When

the customer who arrives is a twelve-year-old girl named Eliza, Nella is thrown through a loop. Her whole business and—due to the nature of her wares—her life may be at stake. Surprising parallels between Nella and Caroline propel this story forward to a shocking conclusion. Caroline must take advantage of her new friendship with a librarian in the British Library to find out just what happened all those years ago. She uses newspaper clippings and maps to sleuth her way to the answer. Add this one to your TBR list too, Rachel!

Rachel: I will do just that. My final reading suggestion is a doozy. It's very...uh...'different' would be putting it mildly. "The Library of the Unwritten" by A.J. Hackwith is a fantasy-fiction story with a focus on demonology. And it takes place...well. Let me help you picture the scene with my incredible powers of visual description: "Many years ago, Claire was named Head Librarian of the Unwritten Wing—a neutral space in Hell where all the stories unfinished by their authors reside. Her job consists mainly of repairing and organizing books, but also of keeping an eye on restless stories that risk materializing as characters and escaping. When a Hero escapes from his book and goes in search of his author, Claire must track and capture him with the help of former muse and current assistant Brevity and nervous demon courier Leto. But what should have been a simple retrieval goes wrong when the terrifyingly angelic Ramiel attacks... [He's] convinced that they hold the Devil's Bible. The text of the Devil's Bible is a powerful weapon in the power struggle between Heaven and Hell, so it falls to the librarians to find a book with the power to reshape the boundaries between Heaven, Hell...and Earth." [Yooper accent] So, a lot to digest there. [resumes in normal voice] But it is very imaginative, and therefore different to a lot of other works out there at the moment. No musty, spectacled librarians in cardigans allowed, folks! I say that as a somewhat musty, definitely bespectacled librarian in a super comfy cardigan. Claire is intense, somebody who has experienced heartache and entertains no nonsense from her wards. She takes her job very seriously—as all librarians should! But she's tempered well by the muse Brevity, whose energetic and carefree nature lightens even the foulest of moods. Leto hampers more than helps, because he's very new to being a demon and is scared of his new, literally godforsaken surroundings. My favorite thing about "Library of the Unwritten" is that this group of dummies has to get the Devil's Bible back to avoid war between Heaven and Hell all without Lucifer finding out they lost it to begin with. The guy would probably be a little t'd off. I also enjoy all of the storybook characters that pop up now and then to both help and hinder Claire along her quest. The premise reminds me of "The Sandman" comics by Neil Gaiman, especially his character Lucien—the head librarian in the realm of the Dreaming. Anyway, if you want to take this deep dive into the Underworld, be sure to read Hackwith's sequel, "The Archive of the Forgotten" as well as the third installment, "The God of Lost Words." The full

series is called “Hell’s Library,” because of course it is. If nothing else, that certainly grabs peoples’ attention!

Mary: Rachel, I have a question: How can you do an episode on stories featuring libraries and not include “The Pagemaster?”

Rachel: Hell if I know!

Mary: Released in 1994 and starring Macaulay Culkin and Christopher Lloyd, “The Pagemaster” is a movie that follows a cautious young boy named Rich who lives his life through statistics. As he tries to shelter from a thunderstorm, he hurries into the library. There, he meets a librarian who encourages him to look in the fiction section, away from his usual, no-nonsense nonfiction. The librarian is quickly shut down when Rich tells him that he just wants to use the payphone. As he passes the fantasy section, he slips in the rainwater and hits his head, waking to an animated world. He quickly finds himself lost. In order to find the exit, he has to pass many obstacles and conflicts inspired by classic literature. For many of us, “The Pagemaster” is a nostalgic movie, but that doesn’t mean you can’t enjoy it today. If you’re looking for another nostalgic movie, go ahead and watch “The Mummy”, released in 1999.

Rachel: I love “The Mummy!”

Mary: Although the title makes it seem as though it might be a horror film, “The Mummy” is surprisingly funny. It follows an English librarian named Evelyn as she tries to put together an archeological dig at the site of the ancient city of Hamunaptra. Evelyn and her new-found companion, Rick, are unaware that another group of archeologists are also looking to dig at this site. When this other group unleashes an ancient curse that was placed on the dead High Priest, his mummy awakes and must be stopped before he can fulfill his evil revenge plan.

Rachel: (chuckles)

Mary: A watchalike for “The Mummy” is “Jungle Cruise,” which came out in 2021 and stars Dwayne “The Rock” Johnson and Emily Blunt. Here, a librarian is also out to find a lost artifact of the ancient world while another nefarious group tries to beat her to it. The Rock’s character is the river guide in the Amazon who initially is just out to swindle money out of the librarian and her brother. Slowly, he becomes just as invested as they are and, together, they become a formidable team. Obviously, I’m not saying that every librarian is a hero, but a lot of heroes tend to be librarians. I’ll just leave you with that to mull over.

Rachel: (laughs) That's all we have time for today, listeners. We hope that you enjoyed this episode of books about books! Remember to celebrate National Library Week from April third through the ninth by visiting us at OCPL. Check the show notes for a list of everything that we just talked about. Please subscribe and rate the podcast if you like what you hear. You can always contact us through the Oak Creek Public Library website or Facebook page by sending messages to @OakCreekLibrary. Until next time, happy reading. Bye!

(Brief outro music)