Not Your Mother's Library Transcript

Episode 51: Library Lovers of Wisconsin

(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: We're glad to be recording again after winter break. First up, we want to give a quick shout-out to those who took part in the Shhh…! Silent Auction event held by the Friends of the Library a couple months ago. Thanks to all of our donors, bidders, staff, and volunteers, this fundraiser was a major success. Proceeds benefited the library for continued community enrichment, and it was great to see everyone come out to take part. That sort of thing really warms my heart, you know? Something else that gets my blood pumping through my veins is Library Lovers' Month! Not to brag, but I am so good at natural transitions, and then ruining them immediately after. Anyway, we celebrate the library every February so that you—our patrons—can learn about new services, explore the space, and just express your feelings for this beloved public institution. Here at OCPL we usually have a program or two lined up, so check the online calendar at oakcreeklibrary.org/events and keep your eyes peeled for flyers around the building. This all ties in rather nicely with today's episodic theme, because we will be discussing books! Well, we always talk about books, but this time they are all written by local Wisconsin authors! Because, let's face it: the library would be a pretty sad place without books, and books simply do not exist without their incredible writers.

Mary: Oh, absolutely! Nothing brings out the library love more than authors that may have been to your library. Let's start with Nghi Vo. You've probably seen her book "Siren Queen" on Amazon's Best Book list, NPR's best book list, or on any number of lists she's been featured on in 2022 and 2023. In this book, Luli Wei is beautiful, talented, and desperate to be a star. Coming of age in pre-Code Hollywood, she knows how dangerous the movie business is and how limited the roles are for a Chinese American girl from Hungarian Hill—but she doesn't care.

She'd rather play a monster than a maid. But in Luli's world, the worst monsters in Hollywood are not the ones on screen. The studios want to own everything from her face, to her name, to the women she loves, and they run on a system of bargains made in blood and ancient magic, powered by the endless sacrifice of unlucky starlets like her. For those who do survive to earn their fame, success comes with a steep price. Luli is willing to do whatever it takes—even if that means becoming the monster herself." If you love the idea of supernatural monsters in the glamourous Hollywood days of America, how about the Jazz era?

Rachel: Give 'em the ol' razzle-dazzle.

Mary: "The Chosen and the Beautiful," also by Nghi Vo, is a reimagining of the character of Jordan Baker from the Great Gatsby. "Jordan grows up in the most rarefied circles of 1920s American society—she has money, education, a killer golf handicap, and invitations to some of the most exclusive parties of the Jazz Age. She's also queer, Asian, adopted, and treated as an exotic attraction by her peers, while the most important doors remain closed to her. But the world is full of wonders: infernal pacts and dazzling illusions, lost ghosts and elemental mysteries. In all paper is fire, and Jordan can burn the cut paper heart out of a man. She just has to learn how." Aw, paper hearts just in time for Valentine's Day….

Rachel: Aw! My first pick is a novel called "American Dervish" by Ayad Akhtar. Ayad was raised in Brookfield, which is just a half hour drive from Oak Creek Library. Now that is close to home! Anyway, "American Dervish" features a Pakistani American boy named Hayat who similarly grows up in a Milwaukee suburb and struggles with his sense of identity and religion. Hayat's family is Muslim. His father is an Atheist and has a strained relationship with Hayat's mother, Muneer, because of his alcoholism and cheating. One day, one of Muneer's old friends from Pakistan, Mina, comes to stay with them, and this ends up flipping Hayat's world upside down. Because Mina is deeply spiritual, and Hayat is very intrigued by what she has to teach him about the Quran, traditional Sufi stories, and their shared religion. His curiosity an unhealthy, obsessive love with Mina, though, and he plots to destroy her newfound romantic relationship with a Jewish man named Nathan. Even when Nathan plans to convert to Islam, Hayat displays both jealously and anti-Semitic behavior. He does everything a young boy can to undermine

things, eventually forcing Nathan to move away. Things only get worse for poor Mina from there, and it is interesting to see how Hayat's actions cause her such grief when A) He cares about her so much and B) his own mother has always taught him to be respectful of women. Ayad plays around with the idea that organized religion can be both beautiful and terrible for those who practice. As the authors puts it, the character Mina is "a paradox: deeply devout, bound by her tradition, subject—in tragic ways—to a patriarchal order with which she struggles." "American Dervish" is a stunning tale, and if you're moved by it I also recommend Ayad's other book titled "Homeland Elegies." This work of historical fiction focuses on more recent history—namely, what it's like being an immigrant in a post-9/11, debt-ridden America run by a megalomaniacal TV personality.

Mary: This next author I know for a fact has been to our library. It's Hannah Morrisey! She honored us with her presence at last year's Meg Jones' Author Fest. It's tacky to name-drop, but I actually met her while the Mayor was introducing himself to her.

(Soundbite of Linda Belcher from "Bob's Burger's saying "The Mayor is here. Hi, Mayor!")

Mary: She's written the "Black Harbor" series, the third and most recent of which came out this past year. "Hello, Transcriber" is the first of the series and follows a police transcriber as she tries to solve a case. "Every night, while the street lamps shed the only light on Wisconsin's most crime-ridden city"—spooky—"police transcriber Hazel Greenlee listens as detectives divulge Black Harbor's gruesome secrets. As an aspiring writer, Hazel believes that writing a novel could be her only ticket out of this frozen hellscape."

Rachel: So accurate.

Mary: "And then her neighbor confesses to hiding the body of an overdose victim in a dumpster. The suspicious death is linked to Candy Man, a notorious drug dealer. Now Hazel has a first-row seat to the investigation and becomes captivated by the lead detective, Nikolai Kole. Intrigued by the prospects of gathering eyewitness intel for her book, Hazel joins Kole in exploring Black Harbor's darkest side. As the investigation unfolds, Hazel will learn just how far she'll go for a good story—even if it means destroying her marriage and luring the killer to her as she plunges deeper into the city she's desperate to claw her way out of." The next two books

in the series take place in the same fictional town, Black Harbor, Wisconsin, but follow different members of the community. She's made it to best-selling lists, book subscription services, and has over four stars on Amazon. A read-alike author would be fellow Wisconsin crime writer, Jeff Nania. His novel "Figure 8" won the 2020 Midwest Book Award for Mystery/Thriller, so you know it's a good one. "A shattered career. A crooked lawyer. An unsolved murder. Seeking peace in the Northwoods is fraught with danger. Every night, John Cabrelli relives the tragic events that ended his career. While struggling to find himself again, John inherits his uncle's cabin and returns to the lake where he spent much of his youth. Little does John know that danger waits for him when he uncovers suspicious circumstances of his uncle's death. Few people will talk about it as John unravels a mystery that could forever change the landscape." If you love this one, check out the other three books in the "Northern Lakes Mystery" series. Speaking of mystery, that is an excellent and natural segue into Rachel's next recommendations!

Rachel: My next pick is by another author who has visited OCPL…but not for the annual Author Fest. Chad Lewis is a lecturer and researcher with a background in psychology and all things paranormal. You might know him from last year's "Paranormal Wisconsin - Tales of Ghosts, UFOs, and Mysterious Creatures" presentation at the library in which Chad combined his strangest cases of alien abductions, haunted places, mysterious creatures, crop circles, and everything else weird and unusual that he has come across. His talks are always super fun—if you love to learn about things out of the ordinary, I definitely recommend attending one of his shows. Chad is also an author, and we have his book "The Wisconsin Road Guide to Haunted Locations" in our collection! Have you ever wanted to do some investigating of your own? Gods, I have! Let this exhaustive book be your "guide for finding haunted bars, bed & breakfasts, bridges, campgrounds, cemeteries, churches, fire stations, hotels, lighthouses, mansions, parks, railroad tracks, restaurants, roads, rocks, schoolhouses, stores, theaters—" (takes a deep breath)—"and much, much more." It is handily divided by different regions and counties to make your search all the easier. Did you know that nearby Caledonia has its own haunted patch? The Root River Bridge purportedly hosts the spirit of a young boy who drowned in the waters below at some point during the 1970s. Chad informs us that "late at night, people

have seen his ghostly image walking in the spooky woods near the riverbank." I myself have walked through those "spooky woods" and can confirm, that…uh…they are rather scary at night. Keep your wits about you! Also, name drop: When Chad gives directions to the bridge, he mentions the Caledonia/Oak Creek border. Score! If you're interested in seeing this for yourself, just be careful not to go during flood season, because sometimes the roads in Caledonia are submerged and closed. That goes for any of these places mentioned in this book: be sure to do your own homework before heading out into the unknown. Safety first, always! If you're a seasoned pro and can't get enough weirdness in your life, I also recommend a few other locale-focused books penned by Chad himself, including "The Wisconsin Road Guide to Mysterious Creatures" and "The Wisconsin Road Guide to Gangster Hostpots". Ever heard of the Beast of Bray Road? What about Jimmy Hoffa? Hit the road, listeners!

Mary: I had such a good time listening to his presentation this past October. I had a chance to talk with him afterward and ask him about my hometown in central Wisconsin. He hadn't heard of the demon possession that took place there, so he said he'd check it out. I'm waiting for that book so I can learn more about it. No rush, Chad.

Rachel: (chuckles)

Mary: I'm gonna hop over to the steampunk fantasy genre with my next pick, because we have it all, folks! It's "The Goblin Emperor" by Katherine Addison. "The youngest, half-goblin son of the Emperor has lived his entire life in exile, distant from the Imperial Court and the deadly intrigue that suffuses it. But when his father and three sons in line for the throne are killed in an 'accident', he has no choice but to take his place as the only surviving rightful heir. Entirely unschooled in the art of court politics, he has no friends, no advisors, and the sure knowledge that whoever assassinated his father and brothers could make an attempt on his life at any moment." It has politics, intrigue, suspense, love…it has it all. If you like the idea of a fourth son of the ruler unexpectedly becoming the emperor after being mistreated his whole life, you'll love the third-born daughter trying to kill a prince that has made her life a nightmare. "Nettle and Bone" by T. Kingfisher is just that! "On her quest, Marra is joined by the gravewitch, a reluctant fairy godmother, a strapping former knight, and a chicken possessed by a demon."

Rachel: (laughs under her breath)

Mary: Together, the five of them intend to be the hand that closes around the throat of the prince and frees Marra's family and their kingdom from its tyrannous ruler at last." This has been on my TBR for quite a while. Both Rachel and I have read some of T. Kingfisher's adult horror novels, and they did not disappoint. While she is not technically from Wisconsin, T. Kingfisher lived in St. Paul, Minnesota for some time, so she's an honorary Midwesterner. I'll allow it for a readalike.

Rachel: That's fair. My last pick is true crime, a genre I personally do not love but am still curious about from time to time. It's "Worse than the Devil: Anarchists, Clarence Darrow, and Justice in a Time of Terror" by D.A. Strang. "In 1917 a bomb exploded in a Milwaukee police station, killing nine officers and a civilian. Days later, a trial began for eleven Italian immigrants who had already been in jail for months for an unrelated riot. The specter of the bombing, for which no one had been arrested, haunted the proceedings. Against the backdrop of World War I and amid a prevailing hatred and fear of radical immigrants and anarchists, the Italians had an unfair trial. Famed attorney Clarence Darrow led an appeal that gained freedom for most of the convicted, but his own methods were deeply suspect. The entire case left a dark, though largely forgotten, stain on American justice." I can admit that this sounds fascinating. Clarence Darrow is also infamous for his involvement in the Leopold and Loeb murder trial in 1924 and the staged Scopes trial in '25. Old-timey crimes are a little easier for me to stomach than those in recent history, so you might find that aspect appealing, yourself. As for the author, Dean has interesting insights because he himself is a criminal defense lawyer in Madison, Wisconsin. He's also an adjunct professor at the University of Virginia School of Law, so…learned. A copy of "Worse than the Devil" is available for check out from OCPL. Check it out today to learn about all this case's twists and turns!

Mary: That's all we have time for today. Thanks for tuning in, listeners. We hope you enjoyed this very Wisconsin episode connecting local authors to our love of the library. We will be back next month with even more recommendations. Remember to read the show notes for a list of everything we just mentioned. And don't forget to show your love of the library by subscribing,

rating, and sharing the podcast with those you love to give us a boost. If you need to reach us, do so through the Oak Creek Public Library website or Facebook page by sending messages to @OakCreekLibrary. We'd love to hear from you! Until next time, happy reading. If you've been counting how many times we've said "love" today, it was 17. There's no prize but we wanted to point it out. Love you!

Rachel: Well, now it's 18…

(Brief outro music)

Rachel: Done! You did it. (snaps fingers) Nailed it!

Mary: While struggling—

Rachel: Woof! Sorry.

Mary: Stop it now. C'mon! (laughs)

Rachel: (laughs) I was just really excited.

Mary: "I was just so thankful that you weren't just gonna be a mess the rest of the podcast." (sniffs)

Rachel: (cackles) Oh, I have no expectation of that.

Mary: (laughs) Shut up!

Rachel: (laughs harder)