Not Your Mother's Library Transcript

Episode 54: Adopt-a-Character

(Brief intro music)

April 2024 – Foster Care

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: This May is National Foster Care month! We are celebrating foster families while also highlighting experiences throughout literature of those who have lost their parents and families. Many of these titles we are about to recommend have present caregivers and mentors while others really leave the main character to battle it out on their own. This is pretty reflective of the true experience of those in foster care. There is plenty of room for improvement in the current foster care system. If you are able to, please consider becoming a foster parent or donating your time and resources to those who are in the foster care system. You can visit dcf.wisconsin.gov/fostercare/become to get more information. For now, let's dive into today's recommendations!

Rachel: There's a wealth of stories that tell the reader how to foster the wrong way. In this example, we'll look at the classic novel "Jane Eyre" by Charlotte Brontë. This takes place during the nineteenth century, and thankfully child protection laws have come a long way since then. Titular character Jane is orphaned at a very young age after both of her parents succumb to an illness. She now lives at Gateshead Hall with her uncle's family, the Reeds. Her uncle was really the only nice one out of the lot, so when he also passes away, Jane is in a bit of a pickle. Her uncle's wife, Sarah Reed, despises Jane and makes it known to her on the daily how much of a burden she is. Protip number one: Don't blame a child for their unfortunate circumstances. Anyway, Mrs. Reed has three children of her own, all of whom are horrible to Jane who has no choice but to become invisible and occasionally try to defend herself against physical torment at the hands of her cousin, John. As you can guess, her childhood is an unhappy one. Jane is

often excluded from family activities and suffers undeserved punishments. When John's bullying turns particularly brutal, Jane has no choice but to fight against him. Mrs. Reed finds out about it and locks her in the red room. If this sounds ominous to you, that's because it is; Jane's uncle died in this room, and she's convinced it is haunted. The young girl goes into panic mode, screaming and crying to be let out, but Mrs. Reed refuses her pleas and Jane eventually passes out from fear. She then has to be attended to by a local apothecary. Immediately, Jane narcs, telling him how much she hates living with her extended family because they treat her so unkindly. The apothecary, thinking it the best thing to do on Jane's behalf, recommends to Mrs. Reed that she should be sent away to school. The spiteful old woman sees this as a good way of getting rid of her unwanted niece, so she ships Jane off to spend the rest of her childhood at an underfunded institution for destitute girls. Surprise: It's awful. Protip number two: If you're looking after a child, don't banish simply because you're the one lacking parental affection. Jane goes through many more trials and tribulations throughout her adolescence, yet she manages to grow into a wonderful person. Still, I would not recommend treating your orphaned relatives as Mrs. Reed did. For a readalike, I recommend "Great Expectations" by Charles Dickens. It stars another famous orphan, Pip, who also lived in England around the same time as Jane Eyre…give or take a couple decades.

Mary: I don't know if we can recommend books about displaced children without mentioning "A Series of Unfortunate Events "by Lemony Snicket. There are a total of thirteen books—of course there are—starting with "The Bad Beginning" and ending with "The End." Very on the nose. The reading level for this series is technically for middle-aged children, but the content is pretty dark. To me, they are classics and can be read at any age. At first, Violet—an inventor, Klaus—a bookworm, and Sunny—a biter…yeah, I said biter—

Rachel: (chuckles)

Mary: —find themselves in the home of a very eccentric long-lost 'relative'…heavy air quotes…Count Olaf, after their parents meet a gruesome and untimely end. The Count is an unwashed, volatile man, clearly after the children's fortune and makes them perform degrading chores like cleaning the filthy house and making dinner with no supplies. They're forced to

sleep on a pile of rocks on the ground and Sunny, the baby, is supposed to use those same rocks as her only toys. The only relief they find is that they are together. The siblings navigate their new lives throughout the books, meeting various other 'relatives', most of which are incapable or unwilling to care for three children. As time goes on, they manage to find clues on how and why their parents are no longer alive and who their parents truly were. There are large man-eating snakes, far away islands, elevators, dangerous cliffs, and much more throughout the pages of this epic tale. This series is quite literally a series of unfortunate events. Just when you think it can't get any worse, it does. I won't spoil the ending for you, but it's definitely worth it to finish the series. If you're looking for more creepy caregivers, you should read "The Graveyard Book" by Neil Gaiman. The main character, Bod, lives in a not-so-normal place: a graveyard. He was raised by ghosts, werewolves, and anybody else who dwells in a cemetery. Because of this, he's learned how to behave as if he's from another time. He's also learned how to 'Fade', just like a ghost! This way, living people cannot see him. Spooky! But have his ghostly caregivers prepared him for the big, living world?

Rachel: Doubtful! For a fantastical tale about a girl who starts out with the worst parents ever and ends up with an amazing and caring foster mum, I recommend "Matilda" by Roald Dahl. Spoilers ahead! Matilda is Mr. and Mrs. Wormwood's daughter, which is strange because they are ridiculously small-minded whereas she is incredibly smart. Before reaching the age of five, Matilda reads through all of the children's books at her local library and soon moves on to highbrow classic literature. Unfortunately, her parents refuse to indulge her growing curiosity or even so much as acknowledge her advanced learning capabilities. Worse, they're emotionally abusive. That's a big no-no, foster folks! In retaliation and out of boredom, Matilda plays pranks on them. By the time she enters school, the Wormwoods have had just about enough of her. At school, though, Matilda's wonderful teacher Miss Jennifer Honey recognizes her abilities and tries to move her into an upper-level class, but the school's headmistress refuses. Ms. Honey goes to Matilda's parents about the matter, but they turn her away, too, saying that little girls shouldn't be so brainy.

Mary and Rachel: (in unison) Ugh.

Rachel: Despite this, Matilda and Miss Honey form an unbreakable bond. When Matilda discovers she has telekinetic powers, it is to Ms. Honey whom she reveals her new powers. By the end of the story—which includes overthrowing a despotic school master—Matilda returns from school one day to find her parents packing up to leave for Spain. Apparently, Mr. Wormwood was selling stolen cars, and the police are now onto him. Matilda straight up asks for permission to live with Miss Honey, which her uncaring parents agree with before booking it out of town. Matilda and Miss Honey have a well-deserved happily ever after, and we never hear from the Wormwoods again. Thank goodness. There are a lot of evil stepparents and mean in-laws lurking in the fantasy genre…just look at the Dursleys from the "Harry Potter" series or Cinderella's whole deal. Take comfort in the fact that in all likelihood, potential fosterers, you'll never be as bad as these guys.

Mary: Did you say Cinderella? One of my very favorite books was "Ella Enchanted" by Gail Carson Levine. The movie, in my opinion, does not do it justice! Ella was cursed at birth with the 'gift' of obedience. If you tell her to do anything, she must obey. That includes sarcasm and colloquialisms. Imagine if someone told you to "get outta town!" when you told them a funny story. You'd literally have to leave town. Instead of breaking her spirit, this curse made her a rebel. When her mother dies, Ella is left with her absent father and later, his horrible new wife—her now stepmother—and stepsiblings. We know this part: the stepmother and her two daughters are awful to Ella. But in this case, she uses this abuse as fuel to go out and find the fairy, Lucinda, who had bestowed this 'gift' of obedience. The journey takes her on a path of self-discovery and allows her to meet people she would not have met otherwise. She befriends elves and even falls in love with a prince. We get so focused on the happily ever after of "Cinderella" that we forget that she had a whole life leading up to it. This is a smart adaptation of the classic tale and will leave you with a new perspective. A readalike is "The Secret Garden" by Frances Hodgson Burnett. The main character, "Mary Lennox, is a spoiled, ill-tempered, and unhealthy child. She comes to live with her reclusive uncle in Misselthwaite Manor on England's Yorkshire moors after the death of her parents. There she meets a hearty housekeeper and her spirited brother, a dour gardener, a cheerful robin, and her wilful [sic], hysterical, and sickly cousin, 'Master Colin'. With the help of the robin, Mary finds the door to a secret garden,

neglected and hidden for years. When she decides to restore the garden in secret, the story becomes a journey into the places of the heart, where trust restores health, flowers refresh the spirit, and the magic of the garden, coming to life anew, brings health to Colin and happiness to Mary." The garden feels magical and possesses a magic for Colin and Mary that really has a profound effect on their lives at Misselthwaite Manor. If you haven't read this classic, please do. If you've read it already, read it again!

Rachel: If you think foster parents in fiction are bad enough, then let me tell you about what happens when an orphan doesn't get adopted. Our prime example is Christine Daaé from "The Phantom of the Opera" by Gaston Leroux. I know, I know. Will I ever shut up about PoTO? Mmmnever. (claps hands together once) Now, we travel back in time to the Paris Opera House during the 1880s, haunted by a ghoulie known as the 'Opera Ghost'. Super original, yeah. But let's take this a bit more seriously, because stagehand Joseph Buquet has been found hanged!

Mary: Dun, dun, dun…

Rachel: Another ill-fated victim of the OG. Things are tense behind the scenes. When young, Swedish chorus girl Christine Daaé "is called upon to sing in place of the opera's leading soprano, Carlotta," the audience gets to hear her beautiful voice for the first time. The performance is a success, and Christine owes it all to her tutor, the…ahem…'Angel of Music' sent to her by her deceased father. You see, when daddy Daaé died—say that five times fast—Christine was sent to train at the Opera. With no father figure left in her life, she falls victim to a mysterious figure whom she assumes in her naivety is an angel when really it's the Phantom! He starts demanding that the managers of the Opera House put Christine in their upcoming leading roles, but they ignore this thinking it's just a prank. Obviously, this angers the Phantom who then wreaks havoc during the next performance and kills a member of the audiences by dropping a chandelier on their head. Yeouch. Then he abducts Christine and holds her prisoner in his lair. Yep, the guy who was stalking and manipulating her all along decided to up the ante and move onto kidnapping. No one saw that coming! Things escalate, because they always do. The Phantom gives Christin the nonchoice of marrying him or killing her childhood friend and everyone in the Opera House with explosives. (clicks tongue) Okay, drama king. I won't spoil the

ending, as that's not really the point. It turns out that when a child is pushed out into the world to fend for themselves, they cling to any semblance of hope presented, even if it's not particularly healthy or safe. In Christine's case, she went along with the Phantom under his guise of the Angel of Music for literal years. When someone pointed out that the relationship was a little dodgy, she marched off in a huff…because of course she would. The Angel makes her feel safe, raises her to stardom, and has her entire world seeming more beautiful than it actually is. By the time he's revealed to be a malevolent stalker with his own dark interests at heart, Christine is already well within his clutches. Look at it like this: If you choose to foster a child, you're potentially saving them from a forced marriage to a walking corpse who would spy on them in their dressing room and mansplain-manipulate-manslaughter their way out of every situation. Do it for the sopranos!

Mary: My next recommendation is probably going to surprise a few of you, but it's "The Lord of the Rings!"

Rachel: (incredulous) What?

Mary: Did you know that Frodo's parents actually passed away in a boating accident?

Rachel: (still not believing it) No.

Mary: I think we all know that he's been living with his uncle Bilbo and that's how he comes across the One Ring…but, especially in the movies, we don't really get a whole lot of backstory. When Frodo's parents, Drogo Baggins and Primula Brandybuck, have their accident, he stays with his Brandybuck side of the family in Brandy Hall until he's twenty-one years old. At that time, Bilbo adopts him and he begins his life in Hobbiton. As in many cases, there is a fantastic movie adaptation for "The Hobbit" and "The Lord of the Rings," but the books cannot be overlooked. I'm taking the opportunity to say that if you have not read these books, please do so. We follow Frodo on his quest to destroy the The Ring that his uncle unknowingly carried to the Shire, endangering them all from Sauron, the evil power in this world. Frodo must travel beyond the comfortable and otherwise sheltered Shire into the unknown lands of Elves, Trolls, Dwarves, Orcs, and monsters. Some monsters you know and some will surprise you. It's a story of lost kings, self-discovery, suspense, and even love. Love for your home, your friends, and

your soulmate. Hmhmhm. A great readalike is the “Mistborn” series by Brandon Sanderson. “For a thousand years, ash fell and no flowers bloomed. For a thousand years, the Skaa slaved in misery and lived in fear. For a thousand years, the Lord Ruler reigned with absolute power and ultimate terror, divinely invincible. Then, when all hope was lost, the scarred, heartbroken half-Skaa Kelsier found in himself the powers of a Mistborn. Kelsier and his brother Marsh were the sons of a nobleman father and a Skaa mother. When Kelsier's father discovered the truth of their parentage, he had their mother executed and attempted to do the same to the brothers, who fled. A brilliant thief and a natural leader, Kelsier recruits the underworld's smartest and most trustworthy allomancers, who each share one of his many powers and relish a high-stakes challenge. Only then does he reveal his ultimate dream: not just the greatest heist in history, but the downfall of the divine despot.”

Rachel: That’s it for now, listeners! Thank you all for listening. Mary and I will return next month with a new episode chockfull of reading recommendations. Please see the show notes for a list of all the books we just talked about. You can subscribe and rate Not Your Mother’s Library. Share it with your friends, your family, and your enemies if you don’t like the show and want to make them suffer or if you do like it and are trying to extend an olive branch. Reach out to us on the Oak Creek Public Library website or via Facebook @OakCreekLibrary. Until next time, happy reading.

Mary and Rachel: Bye!

(Brief outro music)

Mary: (shuffles papers)

Rachel: (pops lips five times in quick succession) Knocked it outta the park.

Mary: (snaps fingers)

Rachel: Hm. Hm. Hm. Okay.

Mary: Boom.