Not Your Mother's Library Transcript

Episode 57: Celebration of Culture

(Brief intro music)

August 2024 – A Celebration of Culture

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: Our City's annual C.A.F.E. – A Celebration of Culture event will take place in Drexel Town Square the afternoon of Saturday, September twenty-first. "It is a day to celebrate [Oak Creek's] cultural diversity through educational interaction and thoughtful conversation. This community event is made possible through the participation of organizations sharing their history and culture to create a global experience. C.A.F.E. highlights the unique aspects of participating groups through…culture, art, food, and entertainment." To help celebrate, all month long you are able to browse the library's cultural book displays and get your hands on some exclusive bookmarks. Then, on September twenty-first, adults and teens can stop by our second floor Service Desk to claim a themed button. Those are only available while supplies last, so you know, get here early if you want one! As for this episode, we wanted to talk about some of our favorite writers from around the world.

Mary: We're going to head over to Sri Lanka for my first pick: Shehan Karunatilaka's "The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida." "Colombo, 1990. Maali Almeida—war photographer, gambler, and closet queen—has woken up dead in what seems like a celestial visa office. His dismembered body is sinking in the serene Beira Lake and he has no idea who killed him. In a country where scores are settled by death squads, suicide bombers, and hired goons, the list of suspects is depressingly long, as the ghouls and ghosts with grudges who cluster around can attest. But even in the afterlife, time is running out for Maali. He has seven moons to contact the man and woman he loves most and lead them to the photos that will rock Sri Lanka." This book won the 2022 Booker Prize! According to his bio, Shehan still lives and works in Singapore. He has

written rock songs, advertisements, and travel stories, making him a wearer of many hats. A good readalike to “The Seven Moons of Maali Almeida” is “Someone Else’s Bucket List” by Amy T. Matthews. “Jodie Boyd is a shy and anxious twenty-something, completely unsure what to do with her life. Her older sister, Bree, is an adventurous, globe-trotting, hugely successful Instagram influencer with more than a million followers. She’s the most alive person Jodie knows—up until Bree’s unfathomable, untimely death from Leukemia. The Boyds are devastated, not to mention overwhelmed with medical debt. But Bree thought of everything—and soon, Jodie is shocked by a new post on her sister’s Instagram feed. The first of many Bree recorded in secret, the post foretells a jaw-dropping challenge for Jodie: to complete Bree’s very public bucket list…” Now, after hearing that summary, you might think to yourself, ‘Hey! Those aren’t the same.’ But I’ll tell you why I think they are readalikes. Both stories deal with death and how those around you cope after you’ve passed on—or haven’t passed on in the case of Maali Almeida. They both center around pretty heavy world issues like civil war and disease. They both have important messages worked into some levity. So I say, if you like one, you’ll probably like the other.

Rachel: I studied literature as an undergrad, and a fair number of my courses centered around world lit. One of the most prominent authors featured was Haruki Murakami. Perhaps known best for his short stories and use of magical realism, this writer is immensely popular in both his home country of Japan as well as here in the United States. I want to focus on one of his earlier works: “A Wild Sheep Chase.” Written in ’82, it’s Murakami’s third novel and can be most simply summed up as a surrealist exploration of Japanese cultural identity following the impacts of World War II. According to NoveList, “In this hybrid of mythology and mystery, a twenty-something advertising executive receives a postcard from a friend, and casually appropriates the image for an insurance company's advertisement. What he doesn't realize is that included in the pastoral scene is a mutant sheep with a star on its back, and in using this photo he has unwittingly captured the attention of a man in black who offers a menacing ultimatum: find the sheep or face dire consequences. This catapults him into a surreal and elaborate quest to find the mythical sheep in the remote and snowy mountains of northern Japan.” Right, so, it’s hard to capture the flavor of the work from that descriptor, but I suppose

that can be said about all of Murakami's works. They are bizarre but also rooted in the human condition, and therefore extremely relatable. If you've never read this author before, I recommend starting with "A Wild Sheep Chase," as it is a bit more narrative driven than his earlier works and not as long as his more recent stuff. If you want to try a collection of his short stories, instead, my go-to is "The Elephant Vanishes." I read it during high school, so it is accessible to most levels of readers teenaged or older.

Mary: I hope you're feeling lucky, because we're moving to Ireland now! My next recommendation is "Prophet Song" by Paul Lynch. "On a dark, wet evening in Dublin, scientist and mother-of-four Eilish Stack answers her front door to find two officers from Ireland's newly formed secret police on her step. They have arrived to interrogate her husband, a trade unionist. Ireland is falling apart, caught in the grip of a government turning toward tyranny. As the life she knows and the ones she loves disappear before her eyes, Eilish must contend with the dystopian logic of her new, unraveling country. How far will she go to save her family? And what—or who—is she willing to leave behind? Exhilarating, terrifying, and surprisingly intimate, 'Prophet Song' offers a shocking vision of a country at war and a deeply human portrait of a mother's fight to hold her family together." If reading about a family's struggle to withstand outside forces trying to pull it apart and deal with internal conflicts is your thing, a good readalike is "The Bee Sting" by Paul Murray. "The Barnes family is in trouble. Dickie's once-lucrative car business is going under—but rather than face the music, he's spending his days in the woods, building an apocalypse-proof bunker with a renegade handyman. His wife Imelda is selling off her jewelry on eBay, while their teenage daughter Cass, formerly top of her class, seems determined to binge-drink her way through her final exams. And twelve-year-old PJ is putting the final touches to his grand plan to run away from home. Where did it all go wrong? A patch of ice on the tarmac, a casual favor to a charming stranger, a bee caught beneath a bridal veil—can a single moment of bad luck change the direction of a life? And if the story has already been written—is there still time to find a happy ending?" It's a new take on the butterfly effect but one that I think you should definitely check out!

Rachel: Next up, I'd like to showcase Indian author Arundhati Roy. Her most popular novel is also her first: "The God of Small Things." It tells a story of family drama, the caste system,

colonialism, Communism, and globalization. There are a lot of characters, so bear with me during this blurb: “The year is 1969. In the state of Kerala, on the southernmost tip of India, a skyblue Plymouth with chrome tailfins is stranded on the highway amid a Marxist workers' demonstration. Inside the car sit two-egg twins Rahel and Estha, and so begins their tale… Armed only with the invincible innocence of children, they fashion a childhood for themselves in the shade of the wreck that is their family—their lonely, lovely mother, Ammu (who loves by night the man her children love by day), their blind grandmother Mammachi, their beloved uncle Chacko, their enemy Baby Kochamma, and the ghost of an imperial entomologist's moth. When their English cousin, Sophie Mol, and her mother, Margaret Kochamma, arrive on a Christmas visit, Estha and Rahel learn that Things Can Change in a Day. That lives can twist into new, ugly shapes, even cease forever, beside their river ‘graygreen’. The brilliantly plotted story uncoils with an agonizing sense of foreboding and inevitability. Yet nothing prepares you for what lies at the heart of it.” Roy manages to write from a child’s perspective in unique and believable ways, playing with grammar and language. She also employs the use of flashback to jump between different periods of time over the narrative, reminiscent of uncovering traumatic memories some of the characters actively repress. Be mindful of the fact, too, that Roy herself is a political activist for human rights. If that doesn’t appeal, what’s wrong with you? But pick up a copy of this book anyway. A good readalike is Roy’s second book, “The Ministry of Utmost Happiness.” Even though it was published twenty-five years later, it is just as grounded in Indian society, history, and culture.

Mary: We’re jumping over to Lithuania now to talk about my third pick, “Between Shades of Grey” or “Ashes in the Snow” by Ruta Sepetys. The original title of this book was “Between Shades of Grey” but has been changed to “Ashes in the Snow” for later editions. Ruta is the daughter of a Lithuanian refugee born in Michigan. According to the blurb, the year is “1941 – Fifteen-year-old Lina Vilkas is arrested by the Soviet secret police and deported to Siberia with her mother and younger brother. Lina fights for her life, vowing that if she survives she will honor her family, and the thousands like hers, by burying her complete story in a jar [in] Lithuanian soil. Lina’s writings and drawings chronicle her fight for survival, her difficulty accepting help from a Soviet guard she’s supposed to hate, and her struggle to retain faith in

mankind amidst the terror." You might have seen the 2018 movie adaptation of this novel, "Ashes in the Snow." A great readalike is "Only the Beautiful" by Susan Meissner. This novel follows two different storylines—one in 1938 in California and the other in Austria in 1948. In California, a vinedresser's daughter finds herself pregnant after finally letting her guard down due to a hard upbringing. Her greatest fear is being sent to a home for unwed mothers. It turns out she had much more to be worried about. Later, in Austria, the sister of the vineyard's owner returns to California to seek out her friend when she learned the truth of what happened to her. While World War II is technically won in Europe, there are so many struggles and ongoing terrors that linger in other parts of the world. You'll have to read the book to find out what happens to both of these characters.

Rachel: I've recommended an author from Japan and another from India, but now let us travel to Columbia with Juan Gabriel Vásquez's "The Sound of Things Falling." "In the city Bogotá, Antonio Yammara reads an article about a hippo that had escaped from a derelict zoo once owned by legendary Colombian drug kingpin Pablo Escobar. The article transports Antonio back to when the war between Escobar's Medellín cartel and government forces played out violently in Colombia's streets and in the skies above. Back then, Antonio witnessed a friend's murder, an event that haunts him still. As he investigates, he discovers the many ways in which his own life and his friend's family have been shaped by his country's recent violent past. His journey leads him all the way back to the 1960s and a world on the brink of change: a time before narco-trafficking trapped a whole generation in a living nightmare." I mean…yeah. You hear horror stories of how the drug trade in South America affects the population, and it's something worth knowing about despite the potentially triggering subject matter. I think it helps that Vásquez is also a journalist who has penned "hundreds of pages of political commentary." I haven't read any of his other novels, but I hear more great things about "Retrospective" and "The Shape of the Ruins" in particular. These also get into the nitty-gritty of daily life in Columbia and how the country's recent and violent history remains to drag the lives of its citizens through a gutter of blood. "The Shape of the Ruins" is next on my TBR list, because it explores assassinations and the peoples' obsession with conspiracy theories.

Mary: That's all we have time for, listeners. We'll be back again next month with even more reading recommendations. Remember to check the show notes for a list of everything we just talked about in this episode. Please subscribe to, rate, and share Not Your Mother's Library. It really helps! You can always message on the Oak Creek Public Library website or through Facebook @OakCreekLibrary. Until next time, happy reading.

Rachel and Mary: Bye!

(Brief outro music)