Not Your Mother's Library Transcript

Episode 65: Faraway Fantasies

(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: There's a fell voice in the air! The library's "Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring Book Club" begins June seventh. Embark on an epic journey with fellow adventurers! We'll delve into the first book of Tolkien's masterpiece, exploring Middle-earth's magic and peril together. Join us for lively discussions, shared insights, and a quest to understand the power of friendship and courage. We will read two chapters each week for a total of twelve sessions. After each meeting, please feel free to follow the group to the Oak Creek Farmers Market located just outside the library in Drexel Town Square. Registration is required and opens May seventh. Limited seats are available. Go to oakcreeklibrary.org/events to sign up! In anticipation, today Mary and I will discuss a few of our favorite reads from the high fantasy genre. For those unfamiliar, 'high fantasy' is set in other worlds that usually come alive with some type of magic. Most focus on a single hero struggling against a kingdom, an army, a god, or some other such ultimate villain. Mystical beasts like dragons and unicorns—or rather convenient eagles—are common but not necessary. "The Lord of the Rings" has saturated modern pop culture enough by now that you should be able to picture exactly what we're talking about, here.

Mary: My first pick is "One Dark Window" by Rachel Gillig. "Elspeth Spindle needs more than luck to stay safe in the eerie, mist-locked kingdom of Blunder—she needs a monster. She calls him the Nightmare, an ancient, mercurial spirit trapped in her head. He protects her. He keeps her secrets. But nothing comes…free, especially magic. When Elspeth meets a mysterious highwayman on the forest road, her life takes a drastic turn. Thrust into a world of shadow and deception, she joins a dangerous quest to cure Blunder from the dark magic infecting it. And

the highwayman? He just so happens to be the King's nephew, Captain of the most dangerous men in Blunder…and guilty of high treason. Together they must gather twelve Providence Cards—the keys to the cure. But as the stakes heighten and their undeniable attraction intensifies, Elspeth is forced to face her darkest secret yet: the Nightmare is slowly taking over her mind. And she might not be able to stop him." This is the first book in the Shepard King series. The second book, "Two Twisted Crowns," came out in 2023. Pardon my shameless plug, but personally, I got the pair—in perfect condition, might I add—for just a dollar through our Friends of the Library Book Nook sale.

Rachel: Nice!

Mary: You really find some great things in there. A great readalike is "The Serpent and the Wings of Night" by Carissa Broadbent. We shift just a bit from abstract monsters to vampires with this one. "The adopted human daughter of the Nightborn vampire king, Oraya carved her place in a world designed to kill her. Her only chance to become something more than prey is entering the Kejari: a legendary tournament held by the goddess of death herself. But winning won't be easy amongst the most vicious warriors [of] all three vampire houses. To survive, Oraya is forced to make an alliance with a mysterious rival, Raihn. Everything about Raihn is dangerous. He is a ruthless vampire, an efficient killer, an enemy to her father's crown…and her greatest competition. Yet, what terrifies Oraya most of all is that she finds herself oddly drawn to him." This is also book one of a series, "Crowns of Nyaxia." So, if you get swept up in book one, you'll have plenty of material to keep it going.

Rachel: If you want entry-level fantasy perfect for a tween and teen audience, I recommend "Return of the Thief," the latest installment in a long-running series by Megan Whalen-Turner. It came out just a few years ago and concludes a story that was first published in 1996. "This beloved and award-winning series began with the acclaimed novel 'The Thief'. It and four more stand-alone volumes bring to life a world of epics, myths, and legends, and feature one of the most charismatic and incorrigible characters of fiction, Eugenides the thief. Now more powerful and cunning than ever before, Eugenides must navigate a perilous future in this sweeping conclusion. Neither accepted nor beloved, Eugenides is the uneasy linchpin of a truce on the

Lesser Peninsula, where he has risen to be high king of Attolia, Eddis, and Sounis. As [a] treacherous Baron schemes anew and a prophecy appears to foretell the death of the king, the ruthless Mede empire prepares to strike. Rich with political machinations, divine intervention, dangerous journeys, battles lost and won, power, passion, and deception." I can recall reading the first two books of this epic, realizing the third wasn't out yet, and checking my library for years before it was finally published. We've all been there, I'm sure. But now all six titles are out, you lucky ducks! No waiting for you. While written for a younger audience, this series is good for first-time fantasists no matter their age. The author often includes short stories at the end of each book to deepen her worldbuilding and keep you sated. A decent readalike series is "The Song of the Lioness" by famed writer Tamora Pierce. These are the original works that set the stage for Pierce's larger world of "Tortall." You don't even have to read them in order if you don't want to! Personally, I started with "Trickster's Choice" since it came out when I t'was just a tween and can attest that they are easy to get into. High fantasy is known for its lore, yes, but a good writer can ease you into their creation no matter the port from which their ship is setting sail.

Mary: My next pick is "Powerless" by Lauren Roberts. "Only the extraordinary belong in the kingdom of Ilya—the exceptional, the empowered, the Elites. The powers these Elites have possessed for decades were graciously gifted to them by the Plague, though not all were fortunate enough to both survive the sickness and reap the reward. Those born Ordinary are just that—ordinary. And when the king decreed that all Ordinaries be banished in order to preserve his Elite society, lacking an ability suddenly became a crime—making Paedyn Gray a felon by fate and a thief by necessity. Surviving in the slums as an Ordinary is no simple task, and Paedyn knows this better than most. Having been trained by her father to be overly observant since she was a child, Paedyn poses as a Psychic in the crowded city, blending in with the Elites as best she can in order to stay alive and out of trouble. Easier said than done. When Paeydn unsuspectingly saves one of Ilyas princes, she finds herself thrown into the Purging Trials. The brutal competition exists to showcase the Elites' powers—the very thing Paedyn lacks. If the Trials and the opponents within them don't kill her, the prince she's fighting feelings for certainly will if he discovers what she is—completely Ordinary." A great readalike is

“Lightlark” by Alex Aster. “Every 100 years, the island of Lightlark appears to host the Centennial, a deadly game that only the rulers of six realms are invited to play. The invitation is a summons—a call to embrace victory and ruin, baubles and blood. The Centennial offers the six rulers [a] final chance to break the curses that have plagued their realms for centuries. Each ruler has something to hide. Each realm’s curse is uniquely wicked. To destroy the curses, one ruler must die. Isla Crown is the young ruler of Wildling—a realm of temptresses cursed to kill anyone they fall in love with. They are feared and despised, and are counting on Isla to end their suffering by succeeding at the Centennial. To survive, Isla must lie, cheat, and betray…even as love complicates everything.” This plot is so, so good. Do yourself a favor and check it out!

Rachel: I’ve got to go with another classic from my younger years: “The Inheritance Cycle” by Christopher Paolini. The first two books in this series got me through recovery from a quadruple wisdom tooth extraction. While I don’t recommend the procedure, I do recommend the stories if you need to lost in your imagination for an extended period of time. And I do mean that, because these books are thick. “When Eragon finds [himself] a polished blue stone in the forest, he thinks it is the lucky discovery of a poor farm boy; perhaps it will buy his family meat for the winter. But when the stone brings a dragon hatchling, Eragon soon realizes he has stumbled upon a legacy nearly as old as the Empire itself. Overnight his simple life is shattered, and he is thrust into a perilous new world of destiny, magic, and power. With only an ancient sword and the advice of an old storyteller for guidance, Eragon and the fledgling dragon must navigate the dangerous terrain and dark enemies of an Empire ruled by a king whose evil knows no bounds. Can Eragon take up the mantle of the legendary Dragon Riders? The fate of the Empire may rest in his hands.” Paolini wrote his first book when he was just fifteen—surprising, given how flawlessly he established an entire mythos and brought so many characters to life. He even invented an entirely new language…something with which Tolkien would no doubt be impressed. There are four titles in “The Inheritance Cycle” in addition to a collection of short stories and a full-fledged book following the character Murtagh. That came out just a couple years ago, so I get the feeling the author isn’t quite done yet. Paolini’s work doubles as the next

leap for readers who enjoyed “Percy Jackson and the Olympians” or anything by Garth Nicks and a stepping stone into adult fantasy like “The Farseer Trilogy” or “Sword of Shannara.”

Mary: I’m keeping the dragon theme going with “When the Moon Hatched” by Sarah A. Parker. “The Creators did not expect their beloved dragons to sail skyward upon their end. To curl into balls just beyond gravity’s grip, littering the sky with tombstones. With moons. They certainly did not expect them to fall.” Raeve is a member of a rebellion group and trained to kill. She’s good at doing what she’s told and not getting caught. However, when a renowned bounty hunter is hired by the crown to kill a member of her group, she gets caught up in the aftermath. The Guild of Nobles—a panel of elementals—turn her into an example and send her to Gore, an aptly-named notorious prison. Here, Kaan Vaegor finds her shackled. Kaan has been through his own trials. He wears the melted crown of the king whose head he took. If you’re looking for banter, a sassy protagonist, and lots of mythical, magical creatures, this is the book for you. A great readalike is “Fourth Wing” by Rebecca Yarros. I really enjoyed the first book of this series. Violet Sorrengail was supposed to follow in her father’s footsteps and become a Scribe—someone who quietly lives among books and records history as a bystander. Unfortunately, her mother General Sorrengail has other plans. Instead, [she’ll] enter the Dragon Rider Quadrant. She must risk her life and train hard to get the chance to bond to a dragon. That is if they don’t set her on fire or eat her first…or if the other cadets don’t kill her. Xaden Riorson, son of a notorious rebel, is Wingleader. Can she stay alive long enough to bond to a dragon? Long enough to fight in the ongoing war? And even if she can do all of that, what chance does she have? She doesn’t have the muscle or the stature to ride a dragon or to fight in combat. The third book, “Onyx Storm,” just released this past November, so you can keep the dragon vibes going.

Rachel: My final recommendation is a middle-grade fantasy called “The Goblin Wood” by Hilari Bell. “One terrible day, Makenna, a young hedgewitch, witnesses her mother's murder at the hands of their own neighbors. Stricken with grief and rage, Makenna flees the village that has been her home. In the wilds of the forest, she forms an unexpected alliance. Leading an army of clever goblins, Makenna skillfully attacks the humans, now their shared enemy. What she doesn't realize is that the ruling Hierarchy is determined to rid the land of all magical creatures,

and they believe Makenna is their ultimate threat - so they have sent a young knight named Tobin into the Goblin Wood to entrap her. In this captivating…adventure, the difference between Bright and Dark magic is as deceptive as our memories, hopes, and fears—and the light of loyalty and friendship has a magic all of its own." This is the kind of book that made wee child Rachel want to dress up in a cloak and hang out in the park for literal hours. Female protagonist? Check. Mischievous magical creatures? Check. Saying 'down with the patriarchy'? Check. Seven years later, Bell came out with a sequel and a final installment in order to conclude the series. Looks like I know what I'll be reading next.

Mary: That's all for this episode. We will return next month with more reading recommendations. Check the show notes for a list of everything Rachel and I just talked about. Remember to subscribe to Not Your Mother's Library, or maybe even write us review. Until next time, happy reading.

Rachel and Mary: Bye!

(Brief outro music)