Not Your Mother's Library Transcript

Episode 71: Cozy & Creepy

(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: The seasons are shifting. In the northern hemisphere, winter used to be in December, January, and February, but now it seems to start later and go all the way through April. Well, at least here in darkest Wisconsin. I can't imagine how much harsher things must be in Canada! Anyway, this is all to say that having a white Christmas is getting less likely at the years go by. December isn't festive-feeling so much as just gray. Blah! And that simply will not do. Winter is supposed to be a time for coziness, of curling up on the sofa with a mug of hot chocolate topped with tiny marshmallows and then reading a good book. Combine that with the tradition of telling ghost stories at Christmas, and we were able to come up with a good idea for this episode: Cozy horror! Mary, in all her great wisdom, suggested this theme, and I think it's the perfect way to ward off the chill of such a dreary month. Without further ado, we can get started.

Mary: I am ecstatic to be back on the podcast! A huge thank you to Audrey for all of her recommendations and time. Now, I love a good paranormal story, and what better way to kick off our recommendations than "A Christmas Carol" by Charles Dickens? I know we are just past the Christmas holiday, but sitting by a fire or next to an amazing-smelling candle and reading about Victorian England's miser, Mr. Ebenezer Scrooge being visited by four—hot take, I know—

Rachel: (chuckles)

Mary: —ghosts, really encapsulates the vibes Rachel was talking about in the intro. When we are introduced to Mr. Scrooge, we quickly come to know that he is a stingy, cynical hermit of a

man. He has no use for other people unless they make him money, no use for holidays, and no use for family. As he is visited by ghosts during the night, he begins to question his view of the world and the value of his life up until this point. Will he be 'scared straight', or will he chalk this strange night up as bad dreams from indigestion?

Rachel: (murmuring laughter)

Mary: If you're a fan of Victorian horror, I hope you'll read another classic, "The Turn of the Screw" by Henry James. "A very young woman's first job: governess for two weirdly beautiful, strangely distant, oddly silent children, Miles and Flora, at a forlorn estate... An estate haunted by a beckoning evil. Half-seen figures who glare from dark towers and dusty windows—silent, foul phantoms who, day by day, night by night, come closer, ever closer. With growing horror, the helpless governess realizes the fiendish creatures want the children, seeking to corrupt their bodies, possess their minds, [and] own their souls. But worse—much worse—the governess discovers that Miles and Flora have no terror of the lurking evil. For they want the walking dead as badly as the dead want them." In true Victorian horror fashion, the reader is left at the end with the burning question: Are there really spectral apparitions on the estate or have the spooky events just been from the stress of the job or the imagination of the children? This story is the inspiration for many modern horror interpretations such as the Netflix series "Haunting of Bly Manor" and the 2020 film "The Turning." Both of these classic novels are perfect to read in the dead of winter.

Rachel: It's no secret that I am a fan of narrative fiction podcasts. They are modern audio dramas like those your great-grandmother used to listen to on the radio of a Friday evening. An immensely popular show I myself regularly listen to is "Welcome to Night Vale." This is billed as "Twice-monthly community updates for the small desert town of Night Vale, where every conspiracy theory is true. Turn on your radio and hide." It's like "A Prairie Home Companion" if the host were to take shrooms. Kooky, yet heartwarming! Given the show's success, Night Vale's writers Jeffrey Cranor and Joseph Fink have also penned a few novels based within the same universe. Today, I want to recommend their book entitled "The Faceless Old Woman Who Secretly Lives in Your Home." "In the town of Night Vale, there's a faceless old woman who

secretly lives in everyone's home, but no one knows how she got there or where she came from...until now. Told in a series of eerie flashbacks, the story of The Faceless Old Woman goes back centuries to reveal an initially blissful and then tragic childhood on a Mediterranean Estate in the early nineteenth century, her rise in the criminal underworld of Europe, a nautical adventure with a mysterious organization of smugglers, her plot for revenge on the ones who betrayed her, and ultimately her death and its aftermath as her spirit travels the world for decades until settling in modern-day Night Vale. Interspersed throughout is a present-day story in Night Vale as The Faceless Old Woman guides, haunts, and sabotages a man named Craig. In the end, her current day dealings with Craig and her swashbuckling history in nineteenth century Europe will come together in the most unexpected and horrifying way." I think you can enjoy this story whether you've listened to the podcast or have never heard it before now. Night Vale appeals to a lot of listeners. But I don't believe that's just because its world is wacky and fun or because the situations its characters find themselves in are so off-the-wall bizarre. It's because the writing is genuine. Radio host Cecil Palmer can't look into mirrors—that's weird. He can't look into mirrors not because his mother once prophesized that his death would involve a mirror but because that very same mother abandoned him when he was fourteen years old—that is hidden depth. It's easy to enjoy the show for its creepy undertones, of course, and there are plenty of parallels to our own world and the human condition oozing out from between the lines. At any rate, the book I'm recommending is narrated by Mara Wilson who also gives voice to the character of the Faceless Old Woman in the podcast. Mara is probably most famous for portraying Matilda in the eponymous 1996 film, and there's just something about her whispery, no-nonsense voice that chills my spine. For more, try Night Vale's other novels, like "It Devours!" This is "a mystery exploring the intersections of faith and science, the growing relationship between two young people who want desperately to trust each other, and the terrifying, toothy power of the Smiling God."

Mary: These next recommendations are going to get you in a magical mood. "Cackle" by Rachel Harrison is full of dark humor to match the afternoon darkness outside. "All her life, Annie has played it nice and safe. After being unceremoniously dumped by her long[-term] boyfriend, Annie seeks a fresh start. She accepts a teaching position that moves her from Manhattan to a

small village upstate. She's stunned by how perfect and picturesque [this] town is. The people are all friendly and warm. Her new apartment is dreamy too, minus the oddly persistent spider infestation."

Rachel: (shudders)

Mary: "Then Annie meets Sophie. Beautiful, charming, magnetic Sophie, who takes a special interest in Annie, who wants to be her friend. More importantly, she wants Annie to stop apologizing and start living [life] for herself. That's how Sophie lives. Annie can't help but gravitate toward[s] the self-possessed Sophie, wanting to spend more and more time with her, despite the fact that the rest of the townsfolk seem…a little afraid of her. And like, okay. There are some things. Sophie's appearance is uncanny and ageless, her mansion in the middle of the woods feels a little unearthly, and she does seem to wield a certain power…" but she couldn't be a witch, could she? If you like witches hiding in plain sight like "Cackle," you'll also love "In the Company" of Witches by Auralee Wallace. "For four hundred years, the Warren witches have used their magic to quietly help the citizens of the sleepy New England town of Evenfall thrive. There's never been a problem they couldn't handle. But then Constance Graves—a local known for being argumentative and demanding—dies while staying at the bed and breakfast Brynn Warren maintains with her aunts. At first, it seems like an accident...but it soon becomes clear that there's something more sinister at work, and Aunt Nora is shaping up to be the prime suspect. There's nothing Brynn wants more than to prove Nora's innocence, and it hurts her to know that even two years ago that might have been easier. Brynn, after all, is a witch of the dead—a witch who can commune with ghosts. Ghosts never remember much about their deaths, but Constance might remember something about her life that would help crack the case. But Brynn hasn't used her powers since her husband died, and isn't even sure she still can. Brynn will just have to hope that her aunts' magic and her own investigative skills will lead her to answers—and maybe back to the gift she once thought herself ready to give up forever." Both of these titles just make you want to put a simmer pot on the stove and brew a piping hot cup of tea!

Rachel: Mm! My next recommendation is a movie to watch with the lights turned off and the popcorn fully popped. It's definitely more of a Halloween vibe, but I can happily watch it any time of the year and have easily seen it over a hundred times. "The Monster Squad" released in 1987 to lukewarm audiences but has since become a cult classic. I received a VHS copy as a gift when I was way too young—it's rated PG-13 and I was, probably, six or seven at the time—but look at me now! This girl is one hundred percent mentally stable! I also brought it to a fourth-grade movie party at school and almost got detention because the substitute didn't know our teacher had sent out permission slips ahead of time. The early 2000s were a strange time. Moving on. This film is about "a group of 12-year-olds [who] form a Universal Monsters fan club called Monster Squad and attempt to save their hometown from Count Dracula and his fellow monsters when they show up for real." Yeah, that sounds like a stupid premise, but I assure you that it is actually great. The club leader gets hold of Dr. Abraham Van Helsing's diary which describes an amulet that can destroy all monsters for good. One day every hundred years, "as the forces of good and evil reach a balance, the otherwise-indestructible amulet becomes vulnerable." Turns out, Dracula and his buds are searching for the amulet so they can destroy it once and for all, finally tipping the balance of the world toward darkness. "With the next day of balance happening within a few days at the stroke of midnight, the children realize they must gain possession of the amulet and use it—with an incantation from Van Helsing's diary—to open a wormhole in the universe and cast the monsters into Limbo." Van Helsing himself had unsuccessfully attempted to do just this one hundred years ago but blew his chance. So, now it's up to Sean and the gang to put things right! They go up against the Wolf Man, Frankenstein's Monster, the Mummy, the Creature from the Black Lagoon, and even Dracula's brides. Again…sounds hokey…up to the gills in cheesiness. But this was the eighties, you guys! Makeup and practical effects were at their peak, so there's plenty of realistic gore to enjoy. The Wolf Man's transformation is hands down the best I have ever seen, and that's counting both "Fright Night" and "An American Werewolf in London." The Mummy and the Gill-man are also strikingly realistic, Frankenstein's Monster makes me cry without fail, and the actor who plays Dracula is next level. There are stakes. Silver bullets. Shotguns. Dynamite. Corniness pairs beautifully with this film's darker undertones, making "The Monster Squad" my first pick for a

cozy movie night. A contemporary watchalike is “The Goonies,” which I am sure everyone and their mother has heard of. It leans more toward lighthearted adventure flick, but both will make you want to fist pump in excitement.

Mary: If you’re looking for something a bit darker, hold on—I got you! I’m taking us back to seventeenth century New England with “Slewfoot: A Tale of Bewitchery” by Brom. A young Englishwoman, Abitha, doesn’t really fit in with the subservient, judgy [sic] community of women in the puritan colony she finds herself a part of. Married to a stranger, “she becomes quickly widowed when her husband dies under mysterious circumstances. All alone in this pious, patriarchal society, Abitha fights for what little freedom she can grasp onto, while trying to stay true to herself and her past. Enter a powerful spirit of antiquity newly woken...and trying to find his own role in the world. [Is he a] protector or predator? But as the shadows walk and villagers start dying, a new rumor is whispered: Witch. Both Abitha and this entity must swiftly decide who they are, and what they must do to survive in a world intent on hanging any who meddle in the dark arts.” I thoroughly enjoyed this book and the illustrations smattered throughout. It feels very dark without being too gruesome which is exactly what winter calls for. A good vibe-alike is “My Darling Dreadful Thing” by Johanna van Veen. “Roos Beckman has a spirit companion only she can see. Ruth—strange, corpse-like, and dead for centuries—is the light of Roos' life. That is, until the wealthy young widow Agnes…visits one of Roos' backroom seances, and the two strike up a connection. Soon, Roos is whisked away to the crumbling estate Agnes inherited upon the death of her husband, where an ill woman haunts the halls, strange smells drift through the air, and mysterious stone statues reside in the family chapel. Something dreadful festers in the manor, but still, the attraction between Roos and Agnes is undeniable. Then, someone is murdered. Poor, alone, and with a history of 'hysterics', Roos is the obvious culprit. With her sanity and innocence in question, she'll have to prove who—or what—is at fault or lose everything she holds dear.” Whodunnit?

Rachel: My last selection is a video game. We rarely recommend games on this podcast, so it’s high time we shake things up! Nothing screams ‘cozy’ to me quite like a point-and-click adventure game. Dunno if that’s because they make me nostalgic for my childhood or if that’s simply the special kind of mood they invoke, but here we have it. “Jenny LeClue is an adventure

game developed and published by Mografi. It was released for iOS, Microsoft Windows, macOS and Linux in September 2019. The ‘Spoken Secrets Edition’ added full voice acting as a free update” less than a year later, which is the version I experienced because I backed the project on Kickstarter in its infancy. “The choices that players make throughout the game have an impact to certain narratives, but not the main story arc. The game contains point-and-click elements and features a hand-drawn art style.” Truly, the art style is its main draw: An autumnal color scheme, lots of sharp edges, and a somewhat grainy texture make this game stand out from the crowd. Here’s the sinister plot: “Author Arthur K. Finklestein is the creator of the Jenny LeClue series of books, a classic children's sleuth series whose sales are dwindling as readers begin to find the stories trite and boring. His publisher demands a darker, grittier Jenny LeClue book or else the series will be canceled, so Finklestein reluctantly responds by giving Jenny her biggest case yet: the murder of the beloved dean of local Gumboldt College, with her forensic science professor mother as the prime suspect. Within the narrative, Jenny must clear her mom's name and repair her fractured relationship with the dean's son, while Finklestein struggles to commit to putting his beloved Jenny and her town of Arthurton through the wringer in order to keep the series alive.” If you like Nancy Drew, then you’ll adore Jenny LeClue! A fun playalike is the “Duck Detective” series. Its protagonist is a classic noir gumshoe who happens to be a duck. Rather than having a drinking problem, he’s addicted to bread. The art style in this series of games is charming, too, and each script just a humorous as the other.

Mary: That’s it for today’s episode, listeners. We will return next month with more recommendations. Remember to check the show notes for a list of everything we’ve discussed today. Please subscribe to Not Your Mother’s Library or write us a nice review. Until next time, happy reading.

Rachel and Mary: Bye!

(Brief outro music)