Not Your Mother's Library Transcript

Episode 72: Farming Fiction

(Brief intro music)

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: Today, we're bringing you books that are set out in the country! Stories in the middle of nowhere. Tales from beyond the city limits. Here in the Milwaukee area, we are surrounded by the hustle and bustle of big city livin', but sometimes you just want to take a break and imagine yourself out in the middle of a hay field or under a big tree. Not all of our suggestions are going to be as idyllic as that, though. There's lots that can happen out in farm country. Take it from me—I grew up in a dairy farming family, and my parents had a hobby farm. The kids are calling it 'homesteading' nowadays. Things can go missing and you don't know who to blame, wild animals or unexpected visitors…the weather can ruin entire crops. At night, it's so quiet that you can hear cars from miles away. That's just an average day out there! So, if everyone has their overalls on, I'll hand it over to Rachel to get this John Deere revved up!

Rachel: You know, it's kind of strange. When Mary suggested this topic, I of course flipped through my list of past reads to find books set in rural areas. They are very distinctive, aren't they? Something about open land and tall grass rustling in the wind evokes a special something in my mind. I have no idea if that's because we were brought up in Midwest America, but it's calming to think about. But the emptiness is also…eerie? A strange dichotomy. So, I'm excited to start us off with some—can you guess? Graphic novels! Yes, my fondness is obvious. Let's go with "The Golden Hour" by Niki Smith, which is an excellent story for readers in middle grade and high school. "Struggling with anxiety after witnessing a harrowing instance of gun violence, Manuel Soto copes through photography, using his cell-phone camera to find anchors that keep him grounded. His days are a lonely, latchkey monotony until he's teamed with his classmates, Sebastian and Caysha, for a group project. Sebastian lives on a grass-fed cattle farm outside of

town, and Manuel finds solace in the open fields and in the antics of the newborn calf Sebastian is hand-raising. As Manuel aides his new friends in their preparations for the local county fair, he learns to open up, confronts his deepest fears, and even finds first love." As you can tell, this is a modern work that revolves around the prescient and horrific problem of school shootings, so bear that in mind when selecting it for your own kiddos. It's addressed really well, though, in a way that's difficult to describe without giving away the entire plot. I think Manuel's journey toward inner peace is grounded in reality thus his character is approachable no matter the reader's age, gender, or personal experience. I really, really liked the depiction of support from friends and family. Sebastian is one of those marshmallows ready to give everyone and anyone a much-needed hug. For a slightly older audience, I recommend the readalike "Essex County" by Jeff Lemire. Its three volumes are comprised of short stories that all come together in a startling way. "Jeff Lemire pays tribute to his roots with [this] award-winning trilogy of graphic novels set in an imaginary version of his hometown, the eccentric farming community of Essex County, Ontario, Canada. Lemire crafts an intimate study of one community through the years, and a tender meditation on family, memory, grief, secrets, and reconciliation. With the lush, expressive inking of a young artist at the height of his powers, Lemire draws us in and sets us free." And that epitomizes the picture I conjure in my head when imagining the very word 'rural'. Those open fields and quiet walks are inextricably tied up in the idea of freedom.

Mary: You know me, I have to get some horror recommendations in there somewhere, so I'm going to start off with them. My first pick is the Netflix original "In the Tall Grass" which is based on the novella by Stephen King and Joe Hill. It starts out by following a pregnant woman named Becky and her brother, Cal. As they're driving to San Diego, they find themselves passing by a field in the middle of nowhere. Nothing is nearby except a small church just a short distance away. The siblings hear cries for help from inside the field, but the grass is so tall they can't see anyone at first. It turns out, a young boy and his parents cannot find their way out of the tall grass. Both Cal and Becky enter the field to try to guide them back to the road. Unfortunately, it isn't as simple as that! Something is preventing them from leaving. They find that distances are warped…the time passes differently. I won't say anything more because I don't want to spoil it, but it's worth the watch or read. My next pick is similar in that the main characters are coming

from that California, big-city life. It's "The Farmhouse" by Chelsea Conradt. Emily is grieving the loss of her mother. She needs a fresh start and to get away from everything that reminds her that she no longer has a mom. Emily and her husband Josh leave San Francisco to their new Nebraskan farm. But they should have asked why it was for sale… Screams wake her up in the middle of the night. Screams that are not from foxes no matter what Josh tries to tell her. She hears her mom's favorite music coming from across the property, and something is watching her from the cornfield. The more Emily digs into the history of the property the farm feels less like a sanctuary and more like a nightmare. I'm telling you to get this one on your TBR right now.

Rachel: My next selection is a classic, and we have my mum to thank for recommending it! This is James Herriot's "All Creatures Great and Small," a series of memoirs from the 1970s that has since sold nearly a hundred million copies. "For decades, Herriot roamed the remote, beautiful Yorkshire Dales, treating every patient that came his way from smallest to largest, and observing animals and humans alike with his keen, loving eye. In "All Creatures Great and Small," we meet the young Herriot as he takes up his calling and discovers that the realities of veterinary practice in rural Yorkshire are very different from the sterile setting of veterinary school. Some visits are heart-wrenchingly difficult, such as one to an old man in the village whose very ill dog is his only friend and companion. Some are lighthearted and fun, such as Herriot's periodic visits to the overfed and pampered Pekinese Tricki Woo who throws parties and has his own stationery. And yet others are inspirational and enlightening, such as Herriot's recollections of poor farmers who will scrape their meager earnings together to be able to get proper care for their working animals. From seeing to his patients in the depths of winter on the remotest homesteads to dealing with uncooperative owners and critically ill animals, Herriot discovers the wondrous variety and never-ending challenges of veterinary practice as his humor, compassion, and love of the animal world shine forth." Warning: If you have a heart, you will cry when reading these books! They are the basis for two TV series: The one from the BBC in 1978 has a whopping ninety episodes, so you can guess at its popularity amongst viewers. The second started in 2020 and is ongoing but already has upward of forty episodes to watch if you need more farm animals in your life. But, again, be prepared to shed some tears.

The stories are touching and wonderful, but they can also be a bit of a punch to the throat, if you know what I mean.

Mary: My next pick is Pulitzer Prize for Fiction winner, “A Thousand Acres” by Jane Smiley. Larry Cook is retiring. He owns one of the largest farms in Zebulon County, Iowa at one thousand acres. He wants to turn it over to the next generation—his three daughters and their families—but Caroline, his youngest, wants no part of it. She has her own career as a lawyer and isn’t interested in running the farm. Larry develops a drinking problem and becomes less than helpful in guiding his other two daughters when dealing with the grim realities of farm life. There’s [sic] the animals themselves, the crops, and cutthroat lenders all causing issues in addition to the family’s internal problems. Domestic violence, sibling relationships, parenting struggles, pride, you name it. Author Jane Smiley “captures the essence of such life with stark, painful detail.” If you enjoy “A Thousand Acres,” your next read should be Kristin Hannah’s “True Colors.” The three Grey sisters grow up on a huge horse ranch. After their mother passes away, the three became best friends as a means to stay sane while dealing with their proud, stern, ‘appearances-are-everything’ father. Winona is the best lawyer in town and desperately seeking her father’s approval. Aurora is the family peacemaker, always setting her own feelings to the side. Vivi Ann is adored by everyone and the star of the family…until a stranger comes to town. "In a matter of moments, everything will change. The Grey sisters will be pitted against one another in ways that none could have imagined. Loyalties will be tested and secrets revealed, and a terrible, shocking crime will shatter both their family and their beloved town.” How ’bout that?

Rachel: My turn again? Okay, let me fall back on the never-ending pile of graphic novels. This next one is heavy on backcountry vibes. I’m talking the boonies. It’s “Grass Kings” by fan favorite Matt Kindt! “A rural mystery series chronicling the tragic lives of…three brothers and rulers of a trailer park kingdom, a fiefdom of the hopeless and lost, of the desperate poor seeking a promised land. Eldest brother Robert leads a grief-stricken life, having lost his daughter to a tragic accident, followed by his wife disappearing one morning never to return. When an enigmatic young woman named Maria flees to their community in search of [a] safe haven, Robert takes her in. Will his decision lead to ruin and retribution dooming the

Kingdom?" Somehow this series is almost a decade old, but it feels like I just read it yesterday. Volumes one through three collect a total of fifteen books full of mysteries, a militia, a serial killer, war, and bloodshed. Not everything is hunky-dory out in the country, folks. Right up the same alley is "Revival" by Tim Seeley, and this one hits even closer to home. "For one day in rural central Wisconsin, the dead came back to life. Now it's up to Officer Dana Cypress to deal with the media scrutiny, religious zealots, and government quarantine that has come with them. In a town where the living have to learn to deal with those who are supposed to be dead, Officer Cypress must solve a brutal murder, and everyone, alive or undead, is a suspect." There's a "Revival" compendium collecting books one through eight, which is the version I read with all the extra cover art and behind-the-scenes. Admittedly, it's less 'farm' and more just 'countryside town', but the feelings I experienced from both of these works were more or less the same.

Mary: My next pick is "Queen Sugar" by Natalie Baszile. "Why exactly Charley's late father left her eight hundred sprawling acres of sugarcane land in rural Louisiana is as mysterious as it was generous. Recognizing this as a chance to start over, Charley and her eleven-year-old daughter, Micah, say good-bye to Los Angeles. They arrive just in time for growing season but no amount of planning can prepare Charley for a Louisiana that's mired in the past: as her judgmental but big-hearted grandmother tells her, cane farming is always going to be a white man's business. As the sweltering summer unfolds, Charley must balance [out] the overwhelming challenges of her farm with the demands of a homesick daughter, a bitter and troubled brother, and the startling desires of her own heart." Filled with wonderful imagery and beautiful descriptions, "Queen Sugar" is asking to be your next read. If you need another story about a family sugarcane operation, you need to add "Cane River" by Lalita Tademy to your list. It's based on her real family and is very well researched! Tademy only calls it fiction because she had to embellish and add personality to the characters. "Beginning with her great-great-great-great grandmother, a slave owned by a Creole family, the author chronicles four generations of strong, determined black women as they battle injustice to unite their family and forge success on their own terms. They are women whose lives begin in slavery, who weather the Civil War, and who grapple with contradictions of emancipation, Jim Crow, and the pre-Civil Rights South.

As she peels back layers of racial and cultural attitudes, Tademy paints a remarkable picture of rural Louisiana and the resilient spirit of one unforgettable family. There is Elisabeth, who bears both a proud legacy and the yoke of bondage... her youngest daughter, Suzette, who is the first to discover the promise-and heartbreak-of freedom... Suzette's strong-willed daughter Philomene, who uses a determination born of tragedy to reunite her family and gain unheard-of economic independence... and Emily, Philomene's spirited daughter, who fights to secure her children's just due and preserve their dignity and future." I currently have this book checked out, but you'll be able to read it after me, listeners.

Rachel: (chuckles) That's very gracious of you. That's it for this episode! Mary and I will be back next month with even more recommendations. Please check the show notes for a list of everything we just talked about. You can always subscribe to Not Your Mother's Library or write us a nice review. Until next time, happy reading.

Mary and Rachel: Bye!

(Brief outro music)