Not Your Mother's Library Transcript

Episode 74: Asian American and Pacific Islander Authors

(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: For this episode, we're celebrating Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month. For those of you who don't know, the Pacific Islands are made up of thousands of islands scattered through the Pacific Ocean. These thousands of islands are categorized into three main regions: Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia. So, with that in mind—plus all of the wonderful Asian American authors we have available to pull from—we have some wonderful recommendations for you. And, of course, this is just the tip of the iceberg! Take it away, Rachel!

Rachel: Today's first recommendation is titled "On Such a Full Sea" and is written by Chang-rae Lee. He was born in Korea but moved to the U.S. when he was a very young child. Lee later became the first Korean-American novelist to be published by a notable American press—Riverhead Books—with his original novel, "Native Speaker." "On Such a Full Sea" was published ten years later, so let's see what it's about: "In a future, long-declining America, society is strictly stratified by class. Long-abandoned urban neighborhoods have been repurposed as highwalled, self-contained labor colonies. And the members of the labor class - descendants of those brought over en masse many years earlier from environmentally ruined provincial China - find purpose and identity in their work to provide pristine produce and fish to the small, elite, satellite charter villages that ring the labor settlement. In this world lives Fan, a female fish-tank diver, who leaves her home in the B-Mor settlement (once known as Baltimore), when the man she loves mysteriously disappears. Fan's journey to find him takes her out of the safety of B-Mor, through the anarchic Open Counties where crime is rampant with scant governmental oversight, and to a faraway charter village in a quest that will soon become legend to those she

left behind." Dystopian fiction is such an underappreciated genre! I am qualified to say that because, as a librarian, I get to see what types of books circulate. There's no dearth of movies or TV series, but it can be hard to find a good book. "On Such a Full Sea" is definitely one of 'em! It explores themes of identity, class, and survival, blending elements of a fable with a mythic quest. That's dystopian literature with hope, something I am always keen to recommend. The readalike is Lee's first book, "Native Speaker," which I mentioned earlier. "Korean-American Henry Park is forever uncertain of his place, a perpetual outsider looking at American culture from a distance. As a man of two worlds, he is beginning to fear that he has betrayed both—and belongs to neither." Obviously, that is realistic fiction instead of dystopian, but these days…what's the difference?

Mary: My first recommendation is "The Fortunes of Jaded Women" by Carolyn Huynh. Huynh is of Vietnamese descent and was born in California. She is an accomplished novelist, screenwriter, and playwright. "The Fortunes of Jaded Women" is her debut novel about a generations-long curse which is as follows: The Duong sisters will never find love or happiness, and never give birth to sons, only daughters. So the witch had said… Mai, the oldest of her three sisters, consults Auntie Hua, her psychic in Hawaii. Auntie Hua shockingly reports that her family will see a marriage, a funeral, and the birth of a son this year! This prophecy unites the family—daughters, mothers, aunts, and cousins—for better or worse. This book is funny, blunt, and showcases how women can emerge victorious even if it seems that the world is against them. If the consequences of ancestors' actions are what drew you to my first recommendation, you'll love "The Original Daughter" by Jemimah Wei. Genevieve Yang thought she was an only child. She was living with her parents and grandmother in a single room in Bedok, Singapore when Arin arrives. She's a reminder of a shameful legacy left behind from her grandfather, who they've long since thought was dead. The two girls bond over the struggle of sacrificing their own wants and needs so that achievement and success becomes the only focus. Failure is not an option. They forgo friendships, relaxation, and any hint of a "social life in pursuit of academic perfection and passage to a better future." But betrayal!

Rachel: (gasps)

Mary: When Genevieve and Arin have a falling out, they have to choose what is more important: Family or ambition. Author Jemimah Wei was born and raised in Singapore and splits her time between Singapore and the United States. She is a National Book Foundation 5 Under 35 Honoree, winner of the William Van Dyke Short Story Prize, and formerly held the Wallace Stegner Fellowship and Felipe P. De Alba Fellowship at Stanford University and Columbia University respectively. Definitely add these authors to your list!

Rachel: My next pick is “The Vagrants” by Yiyun Li. She “is a winner of the Frank O’Connor International Short Story Award, the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award, and the Guardian First Book Award. [Li] grew up in Beijing and attended Peking University. She came to the United States in 1996 to study medicine and started writing two years later. After receiving a master’s degree in immunology from the University of Iowa, she attended the Iowa Writers’ Workshop where she received her MFA. Li was [then] selected for a Whiting Writers’ Award and was named by Granta as one of best young American novelists under thirty-five.” An impressive CV! Does her book live up to all the hype? Let’s find out. “Morning dawns on the provincial city of Muddy River. A young woman, Gu Shan, a bold spirit and a follower of Chairman Mao, has renounced her faith in Communism. Now a political prisoner, she is to be executed for her dissent. Her distraught mother, determined to follow the custom of burning her only child’s clothing to ease her journey into the next world, is about to make another bold decision. Shan’s father, Teacher Gu, who has already, in his heart and mind, buried his rebellious daughter, begins to retreat into memories. Neither of them imagines that their daughter’s death will have profound and far-reaching effects in Muddy River and beyond. Life in a world of oppression and pain is portrayed through stories of resilience, sacrifice, perversion, courage, and belief. We read of delicate moments and acts of violence…as Gu Shan’s execution spurs a brutal government reaction.” I’ve read a few stories set in China during the Cultural Revolution, and they were about as heart wrenching as you would expect. If you are looking to inflict more anguish upon yourself, my readalike is “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers” by the same author. Its “breathtaking stories are set in China and among Chinese Americans in the United States. Li illuminates how mythology, politics, history, and culture intersect with personality to create fate. From the bustling heart of Beijing, to a fast-food

restaurant in Chicago, to the barren expanse of Inner Mongolia, *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers* reveals worlds both foreign and familiar." I like the idea of reading a story set in a specific place and then comparing it to others told by the same author in a completely different environment. Or are they completely different? I'm willing to bet there are more similarities between east and west than you might think.

Mary: If you're looking for thrillers, I have you covered! My next recommendation is "The Faceless" by Vanda Symon. Symon's father immigrated from Fiji to New Zealand before she was born, but she strongly identifies with her Fijian roots. She has been involved with the New Zealand Society of Authors for many years and is the National President. Her book, "The Faceless" starts with Brad, a middle-aged man with a job and family he hates. When he's finally had enough of his life, he decides to pick up a teenage sex worker in downtown Auckland. He ends up assaulting, kidnapping her, and taking her to an abandoned warehouse that he owns. Then we meet Max. Max is experiencing homelessness and is just trying to make it through the day. But his one friend in the world has gone missing. In his mission to find her, he has to call people from his past and reopen old wounds that never really healed. It's giving Criminal Minds vibes. If you're looking for a cozier crime novel, my next recommendation is "Arsenic and Adobo" by Mia P. Manansala. This is actually the first book in the series "Tita Rosie's Kitchen Mystery." It has been awarded several accolades including the Macavity Award for Best First Mystery Novel and the Agatha Award for Best First Novel. Mia P. Manansala is Filipino and "uses humor (and murder) to explore aspects of the Filipino diaspora, queerness, and her millennial love for pop culture." In this novel, Lila is charged with saving her Tita's failing restaurant, but it becomes quite the odyssey when the horrible, horrible, horrible—did I mention horrible?

Rachel: Mmhm!

Mary: …food critic, who just so happens to be her ex-boyfriend, kicks the bucket. And who was the last person to see him? Lila. Ugh. Since the cops are treating her like she's definitely the one who did it, she starts her own investigation. Armed with the nosey auntie network, her best friend, and her trusted wiener dog, she's determined to find the perp.

Rachel: Riding the wave of National Poetry Month, I present to you Tayi Tibble. “An indigenous writer and poet based in New Zealand, she was born in 1995. In 2017, she completed a Master's in Creative Writing from the International Institute of Modern Letters, Victoria University of Wellington, where she was the recipient of the Adam Foundation Prize.” This is one of those instances—growing increasingly more common as the years go by—wherein someone younger than me has accomplished so much more by a landslide. [chuckles sardonically] “Intimate, moving, virtuosic, and hilarious, Tayi Tibble is one of the most exciting new voices in poetry today. In *Poūkahangatus*, her debut volume, Tibble challenges a dazzling array of mythologies—Greek, Māori, feminist, kiwi—peeling them apart, respinning them in modern terms. Her poems move from rhythmic discussions of the Kardashians, sugar daddies, and Twilight to exquisite renderings of the natural world and precise emotions. Tibble is also a master narrator of teenage womanhood, its exhilarating highs and devastating lows; her high-camp aesthetics correlate to the overflowing beauty, irony, and ruination of her surroundings. Along the way, Tibble scrutinizes perception and how she as a Māori woman fits into trends, stereotypes, and popular culture. With language that is at once colorful, passionate, and laugh-out-loud funny, *Poūkahangatus* is the work of one of our most daring new poets.” Intrigued? So was I! Which meant that I also had to get my hands on a copy of her second book, “Rangikura.” “Tayi Tibble returns on the heels of an incendiary debut with a unique new collection. With wit, humor, and a deep understanding of our social and political environment, Tibble interrogates the boundaries between desire and love…colonization and exploitation. At once a look back at coming-of-age and a painful elegy to the traumas faced by her Māori community, *Rangikura’s* intimacy will move readers to laughter and tears. These poems…are both nostalgic for, and exhausted by, the pursuit of an endless summer. A profoundly original emotional vulnerability threads from each plain-spoken line.” Here is a snippet to send you off: “They saw things in me I wanted to see in myself / that’s why I let them see me that’s why I let them see me / on certain nights in certain lights when the planets / lined up like a string of pearls in the sky and the moon / was the correct hue.” (sighs) Dreamy.

Mary: My final recommendations for today have to do with fitting in and identity. “The Tiger Mom’s Tale” by Lyn Liao Butler is the first of these. Lexa Thomas grew up in a family of blondes

in New York City despite her father being Taiwanese and living there. When she visited her father when she was younger, Lexa thought she had finally found a place where she belonged. But even there, some thought she wasn't Taiwanese enough, either. Does she leave her safe life in New York City to claim her heritage in Taiwan? Or does she stay in New York, thus allowing her Taiwanese family to lose their home? She only has the advice of her two half-sisters who couldn't be more different from each other and a man she definitely does not have a crush on. As the truth unfolds, she has to make her life-changing decision. The author, "Lyn Liao Butler, was born in Taiwan and moved to the States when she was seven. Before becoming an author, she was a professional ballet and modern dancer, and is still a personal trainer, fitness instructor, and yoga instructor." My last recommendation for today is "The Bone People" by Keri Hulme. This is a "powerful, visionary, Booker Award-winning novel about the complicated relationships between three outcasts of mixed European and Māori heritage. Out of this unorthodox trinity, Keri Hulme has created what is at once a mystery, a love story, and an ambitious exploration of the zone where Indigenous and European New Zealand meet, clash, and sometimes merge." Kerewin is a reclusive artist, part Māori, part European, an artist estranged from her art. Her solitude is disrupted by Simon, a mute young boy who tries to steal from her. As she gets to know Simon better, she also becomes entwined with his Māori foster father, Joe, who rescued the young boy from a shipwreck. But he treats the boy with a strange combination of tenderness and brutality. I don't think you'll read another book quite like this one.

Rachel: That's it—we are finished for the day, listeners. Mary and I shall return next month with more recommendations. Remember to check the show notes for a list of the media we just covered. Please subscribe to Not Your Mother's Library so that you never risk missing an episode. Until next time, happy reading.

Mary and Rachel: Bye!

(Brief outro music)