Not Your Mother's Library Transcript

Episode 77: Semiquincentennial

(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 are jumping on the semiquincentennial train and giving you some recommendations having to do with American history! But we are celebrating not only America's 250th birthday, we are also throwing in Constitution Day which is September seventeenth. "Constitution Day signifies the day thirty-nine delegates officially signed the United States Constitution on September 17, 1787. The Constitution was written in the summer of 1787 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, by delegates from 12 states, in order to replace the Articles of Confederation with a new form of government. It created a federal system with a national government composed of three separated powers, and included both reserved and concurrent powers of [the] states." For more information on Constitution Day, please visit billofrightsinstitute.org. But I'm not done yet! We also wanted to tell you about the Daughters of the American Revolution's traveling exhibit, "Patriots of the American Revolution: Legacies in Wisconsin" which will be displayed on the library's second floor from November fourth through the twenty-fifth. "This interactive traveling exhibit presents viewers with information about Patriots, their families, their migration to what is now Wisconsin, and their contributions. As the exhibit moves around the state, the kiosk is customized to display information about Patriots and descendants with local connections." Hopefully, you can all stop in to see the display in November. So, on that note, let's get into some historical recommendations.

Rachel: Attending the American public-school system, U.S. history seemed to be the most important subject when I was a kid. Patriotism even spilled over into my art and music classes, which was a little overbearing. But I did not truly start thinking critically about this subject until the end of middle school, maybe even early into high school. By then I was already far more

interested in world history and global perspectives, something which always sat on the backburner up until that point. Or maybe I'm misremembering! Childhood is hazy at best. Either way, what I do recall is being a sophomore assigned chapters from Howard Zinn's "A People's History of the United States." You've hopefully read this book yourself but, if not, it comes highly recommended! "The classic national bestseller chronicles American history from the bottom up, throwing out the official narrative taught in schools—with its emphasis on great men in high places—to focus on the street, the home, and the workplace. Known for its lively, clear prose as well as its scholarly research, *A People's History of the United States* [was] the only volume to tell America's [his]story from the point of view of—and in the words of—America's women, factory workers, African-Americans, Native Americans, the working poor, and immigrant laborers. As historian Howard Zinn shows, many of our country's greatest battles—the fights for a fair wage, an eight-hour workday, child-labor laws, health and safety standards, universal suffrage, women's rights, racial equality—were carried out at the grassroots level, against bloody resistance. Covering Christopher Columbus's arrival through President Clinton's first term, [it] features insightful analysis of the most important events in our history." This sort of thing was groundbreaking upon first publication in 1980, managed to cause a stir when it was updated in 2003, and I am saddened to say that it is somewhat of a rare animal even in modern times. It "intentionally centers on the negative aspects of American history, omits traditional heroic narratives, and applies an explicitly partisan, leftist framework" which critics claim is biased. Still, for a basic yet essential view into sociology from the point of view of marginalized populations, it is absolutely worth the read. To help you get more out of this, a great companion is "History: A Very Short Introduction" by John H. Arnold. This guide will help you understand how history is studied and interpreted. The concepts are college-level, but this book really is short at only 136 pages and standing at less than seven inches tall!

Mary: My first recommendation is a young adult novel: "Fever 1793" by Laurie Halse Anderson. I remember reading this book in middle school and loving it so much! Little middle-school Mary was a history nerd…

Rachel: (chuckles)

Mary: …and this book is so well researched it scratched that little history itch in my brain. “In late summer 1793, the streets of Philadelphia are abuzz with mosquitoes and rumors of fever. Down near the docks, many have taken ill, and the fatalities are mounting. Now they include Polly, the serving girl at the Cook Coffeehouse. But fourteen-year-old Mattie Cook doesn't get a moment to mourn the passing of her childhood playmate. New customers have overrun her family's coffee shop, located far from the mosquito-infested river, and Mattie's concerns of fever are all but overshadowed by dreams of growing her family's small business into a thriving enterprise. But when the fever begins to strike closer to home, Mattie's struggle to build a new life must give way to a new fight—the fight to stay alive.” This book is a fictional snapshot at what living in post-revolution Philadelphia would have been like for a young person and her family. If you’re looking for a more nonfiction take, a great book on this topic is “Yellow fever: A Deadly Disease Poised to Kill Again” by James L. Dickerson. “Filled with poignant and graphic scenes culled from historical archives, Dickerson recounts the history of one of the most feared diseases in the United States. From the late 18th to the early 20th century, yellow fever killed Americans by the tens of thousands in the Northeast and throughout the South. In Memphis alone, five thousand people died in 1878. [The author] describes how public health officials gradually eliminated this disease from the country so that by the mid-1950s it had ceased to be of much concern to the public at large. However, to this day no cure has been found. As a mosquito-borne viral infection, yellow fever is impervious to antibiotics, and it continues to wreak havoc in parts of South America and Africa. Focusing on the present, Dickerson discusses the potential threat of yellow fever as a biological warfare agent in the hands of terrorists. Also of concern to public health researchers is the effect of global warming on mosquito populations. Even a one-to-two degree warming enables disease-bearing mosquitoes to move into areas once protected by colder weather. He concludes with a discussion of current precautionary efforts based on interviews with experts and analysis of available studies.” Despite this book coming out in 2006, this is still a great starting point if you’re interested in this topic.

Rachel: History can be a hard subject for kids to get into. A gateway series that I remember fondly from my own childhood is “American Girl.” Yes—these are the historical fiction books

released in conjunction with the famous dolls. I had an off-brand version of my own doll…named Rachel, of course! The best thing about the books is that they span just over two hundred years, giving readers a glimpse into different pockets of time. You can learn about the Nez Perce Native Americans in the Western U.S. with Kaya. Felicity lived in Colonial Virginia around the time of the Revolutionary War, and Caroline shares her story from the War of 1812. Josefina lived on a ranch in the southwest during the 1820s, while Cecile and Marie-Grace's alternating point-of-view stories jump ahead to 1850s New Orleans. One of the most popular American Girls is Kristen whose story is about her life as the daughter of Swedish immigrants living in Minnesota. Following that is Addy's story, set towards the end of the Civil War when she and her mother escape slavery to freedom in Philadelphia. Victorian-era Samantha deals with societal classes during segregation. Claudie experiences the Harlem Renaissance in New York City, Kit makes it through the Great Depression, and Molly supports her family throughout the duration of World War II. Julie is a fun-loving free spirit in 1970s San Francisco. Courtney is the most modern to date from the 1980s. I don't know much about these later stories but am interested in what characters from the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s would look like. A decent readalike series is "Dear America." These are also historical fiction novels aimed at girls ages 8-14. "Each book is written in the form of a diary of a young woman's life during an important event or time period in American history."

Mary: My next recommendation is "A Girl Called Samson" by Amy Harmon. "In 1760, Deborah Samson is born to Puritan parents in Plympton, Massachusetts. When her father abandons the family and her mother is unable to support them, Deborah is bound out as an indentured servant. From that moment on, she yearns for a life of liberation and adventure. Twenty years later, as the American colonies begin to buckle in their battle for independence, Deborah, impassioned by the cause, disguises herself as a soldier and enlists in the Continental Army. Her impressive height and lanky build make her transformation a convincing one, and it isn't long before she finds herself confronting the horrors of war head-on. But as Deborah fights for her country's freedom, she must contend with the secret of who she is—and, ultimately, a surprising love she can't deny." It's giving Disney's "Mulan" but during the Revolutionary War. A great read-alike is "The Tory Widow" by Christine Blevins. "On a bright May day in New York

City, Anne Peabody receives an unexpected kiss from a stranger. Bringing news of the repeal of the Stamp Act, Jack Hampton, a member of the Sons of Liberty, abruptly sweeps Anne into his arms, kisses her, and then leaves her to her fate of an arranged marriage... [In] 1775, nearly ten years have passed and Anne, now the Widow Merrick, continues her late husband's business printing Tory propaganda, not because she believes in the cause, but because she needs the money to survive. When her shop is ransacked by the Sons of Liberty, Anne once again comes face to face with Jack and finds herself drawn to the ardent patriot and his rebel cause. As shots ring out at Lexington and war erupts, Anne is faced with a life-altering decision - sit back and watch her world torn apart, or stand and fight for both her country's independence and her own." Oh man, what a time to be alive!

Rachel: If you are a fan of Ken Burns, the filmmaker made famous for his documentaries of U.S. history, then you might enjoy "Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era" by James M. McPherson. This is part of an ongoing anthology, "The Oxford History of the United States Series," a multi-volume narrative history of the U.S. covering everything from Indigenous experience and European exploration of the New World to the early republic of the 1780s, Reconstruction and the Glided Age, all the way to Watergate and beyond. So, extensive. "Battle Cry of Freedom" is "filled with fresh interpretations and information, puncturing old myths and challenging new ones. [Its] fast-paced narrative fully integrates the political, social, and military events that crowded the two decades [of the Civil War] from the outbreak of one war in Mexico to the ending of another at Appomattox. Packed with drama and analytical insight, the book vividly recounts the momentous episodes that preceded the [war] and then moves into a masterful chronicle of the war itself—the battles, the strategic maneuvering on both sides, the politics, and the personalities. Particularly notable are McPherson's new views on such matters as the slavery expansion issue in the 1850s, the origins of the Republican Party, the causes of secession, internal dissent and anti-war opposition in North and the South, and the reasons for the Union's victory. The book's title refers to the sentiments that informed both the Northern and Southern views of the conflict: the South seceded in the name of that freedom of self-determination and self-government for which their fathers had fought in 1776, while the North stood fast in defense of the Union founded by those fathers as the bulwark of American liberty.

Eventually, the North had to grapple with the underlying cause of the war—slavery—and adopt a policy of emancipation as a second war aim. This ‘new birth of freedom’, as Lincoln called it, constitutes the proudest legacy of America's bloodiest conflict.” The moniker is apt; an estimated 750,000 to 850,000 total deaths makes this America's worst war for lives lost—that’s more than the loss of American lives in World Wars I and II combined. I can’t even parse those statistics. Bloodshed was caused not only by combat but the rampant spread of disease, but those are a lot of attributed deaths no matter the direct cause.

Mary: My next recommendation has been very popular and, actually, one of our book clubs here at OCPL just read it recently. It’s based on the true story of Martha Ballard, a midwife in Maine in 1789. It’s “The Frozen River” by Ariel Lawhon. “When the Kennebec River freezes, entombing a man in the ice, Martha is summoned to examine the body and determine cause of death. As a midwife and healer, she is privy to much of what goes on behind closed doors in Hallowell. Her diary is a record of every birth and death, crime and debacle that unfolds in th[is] close-knit community. Months earlier, Martha documented the details of an alleged rape committed by two of the town's most respected gentlemen—one of whom has now been found dead in the ice. But when a local physician undermines her conclusion, declaring the death to be an accident, Martha is forced to investigate the shocking murder on her own. Over the course of one winter, as the trial nears, and whispers and prejudices mount, Martha doggedly pursues the truth. Her diary soon lands at the center of the scandal, implicating those she loves, and compelling Martha to decide where her own loyalties lie.” If rebellion and action is your bag, a great readalike is “The Whiskey Rebels” by David Liss. “Ethan Saunders, once among General Washington’s most valued spies, now lives in disgrace, haunting the taverns of Philadelphia. An accusation of treason has long since cost him his reputation and his beloved fiancée, Cynthia Pearson, but at his most desperate moment he is recruited for an unlikely task—finding Cynthia’s missing husband. To help her, Saunders must serve his old enemy, Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton, who is engaged in a bitter power struggle with political rival Thomas Jefferson over the fragile young nation’s first real financial institution: The Bank of the United States. Meanwhile, Joan Maycott is a young woman married to another Revolutionary War veteran. With the new states unable to support their ex-soldiers, the

Maycotts make a desperate gamble: trade the chance of future payment for the hope of a better life on the western Pennsylvania frontier. There, amid hardship and deprivation, they find unlikely friendship and a chance for prosperity with a new method of distilling whiskey. But on an isolated frontier, whiskey is more than a drink; it is currency and power, and the Maycotts' success attracts the brutal attention of men in Hamilton's orbit, men who threaten to destroy all Joan holds dear. As their causes intertwine, Joan and Saunders—both patriots in their own way—find themselves on opposing sides of a daring scheme that will forever change their lives and their new country." Ans if that doesn't make you want to add these books to your TBR, IDK what will!

Rachel: (laughs) That's the end of this episode. Mary and I will return next month with more reading recommendations. Please remember to check the show notes for a list of everything we just talked about together. You might also consider subscribing to Not Your Mother's Library so that you'll automatically be notified about future releases. Until then, happy reading.

Mary and Rachel: Bye!

(Brief outro music)