



**WSIRN Episode 175: Your library called, and they want their books back**  
*Hosted by Anne Bogel, with guest Michelle Wilson*

[00:00:00] [COLD OPEN]

MICHELLE: So what do you got?

ANNE: I don't know, that's a tough ask... Do you want to get back together in a month and talk about it?

MICHELLE: [LAUGHS] Seriously?

ANNE: That would be disappointing, wouldn't it?

MICHELLE: [LAUGHS] Well I think the readers might think, wait a minute, this is not how it's supposed to go!

[ANNE LAUGHS]

[CHEERFUL INTRO MUSIC]

[00:00:15]

ANNE: Hey, Readers. I'm Anne Bogel, and this is What Should I Read Next? Episode 175. Welcome to the show that's dedicated to answering the question that plagues every reader: what should I read next? We don't get bossy on this show: What we WILL do here is give you the information you need to choose your next read. Every week we'll talk all things books and reading and do a little literary matchmaking with one guest.

Thank you to all the What Should I Read Next listeners who responded to our Patreon announcement with such excitement! It is already a warm and inviting community thanks to you—and also a decisive community—thanks to our new Hardbackers, that is, hardback level patrons, who participated in our poll to choose the title for last week's episode. If you haven't joined in the fun yet, go to [patreon.com/whatshouldireadnext](https://patreon.com/whatshouldireadnext) to be first in line for WSIRN news, bonus episodes, behind-the-scenes clips, and much more.

Next month, Hardback level patrons can tune in to the first quarterly liveshow... my producer Brenna and I will sit down and video chat with patrons LIVE about What

Should I Read Next, what we've personally been reading lately, and of course, do a little literary matchmaking. Again, that's Patreon P-A-T-R-E-O-N [patreon.com/whatshouldireadnext](https://patreon.com/whatshouldireadnext), and thanks to ALL of you for all of the ways you support the show just by tuning in every week. It is so good to be among people who are reading.

\*\*\*

[00:01:38]

*ANNE: Hey readers, I have some exciting news: you can now listen to our back catalog and new episodes of WSIRN, completely ad-free, on Stitcher Premium.*

*Stitcher Premium has tons of other ad-free shows including The Popcast, Simple, and Satellite Sisters. Plus, you'll get access to hundreds of hours of original content, audio documentaries, and even exclusive bonus episodes from some of your other favorite podcasts.*

*You can sign up now for a free month of Stitcher Premium by going to [stitcherpremium.com/wonderly](https://stitcherpremium.com/wonderly) and using the promo code 'WONDERY.' Once you're signed up, just download the Stitcher app for iOS or Android and start listening. That's [stitcherpremium.com/wonderly](https://stitcherpremium.com/wonderly) and promo code 'WONDERY'.*

\*\*\*

[00:02:19]

ANNE: Readers, last fall my book tour for I'd Rather Be Reading took me to Denver, Colorado, where I enjoyed meeting an amazing crowd of readers at the fabulous independent bookstore BookBar. It was my second visit to BookBar but my first event there and they could not have been more wonderful or welcoming hosts. One of the delights of going on the road was getting to meet so many readers, so many of you—some for the first time, and some that I felt like I already knew, because either I'd met them in person before or had been friendly with them online for many years at this point. Today's guest Michelle Wilson falls into the second category. She's the one who first urged me to visit BookBar—as a reader—and last fall we got to not only meet in person, which was absolutely lovely, but also we had the opportunity to sit down and talk about the books we loved, and the books we WISHED we could read ... but that didn't seem to be out there. Today we get to continue that conversation.

I'm so pleased to have Michelle on the show today to talk about the character type she has noticed we're missing from the bookshelves, and to recommend some titles to fill that void in her reading life. It's not easy, which is probably why it's such a fun conversation. Let's get to it!

[00:03:23]

ANNE: Michelle, welcome to the show.

[00:03:26]

MICHELLE: Hi, Anne. Thanks for having me.

[00:03:27]

ANNE: It's so nice to be doing this again. Because you and I have actually gotten to sit down once before in Denver, in I think BookBar's offices and talk all things books and reading.

MICHELLE: That's right. I almost forgotten that, but you're right.

ANNE: It feels like a very long time ago. Well that was back in the gorgeous fall. In here, it's 40 degrees and hasn't stopped raining for a week, so it does feel kind of like another lifetime.

MICHELLE: Oh, it's 15 here and I really am mad.

ANNE: [LAUGHS] Now, you're in Denver. Are you from Colorado?

MICHELLE: I moved here when I was like seven, so basically. I'm from the Midwest originally and that's where all the extended family is. But I've been here since I was in second grade.

ANNE: So basically you're always in need of good, indoors reading?

[00:04:13]

MICHELLE: Yeah.

ANNE: It was such a delight to meet you in person at BookBar and I'm so excited to be talking again even though now you're in Denver and I'm back in Kentucky.

MICHELLE: I know 'cause this morning I was just listening to you when you were in Scotland.

ANNE: Oh, that was so fun. I am really excited to retackle an issue that you brought up the last time we talked about books. And that is the dearth of quality literature that features older women, and also men, but you said you've especially noticed older women are missing from the pages of the kinds of books you enjoy reading. Would you tell me more about that?

MICHELLE: You know, when you're looking at the New York Times bestseller list, the kind of book that everybody reads, they're about maybe people from 25 to 40. There is nobody, especially women 50 and over just being women. They're either like magical grandmothers who ... [ANNE LAUGHS] can fly around or they're like some elderly curmudgeny old man who like escapes from an assisted living facility and walks across the Antarctic.

ANNE: Hypothetically speaking.

[00:05:18]

MICHELLE: Hypothetically speaking, yes. [LAUGHS] It feels like a larger thing, like a society thing, like ... I'm all for getting in at the movies for a reduced price, but it feels like society, once you're over I don't know, 55, nobody even notices you anymore. It makes sense that there's not a whole lot of books written about that part of people's lives.

MICHELLE: You know, I'm not going to have children, but I still work. I still live. I still have fun. And it doesn't seem like there's a whole lot of books about men and women doing those kind of things that are my age.

ANNE: Which is interesting because there's so many writers that age and there's so many readers that age. And this isn't something that I've thought a lot about until you pointed it out to me. What made you realize this is missing from the books you were looking for?

MICHELLE: You know, I think it started maybe with some of those Fredrik Backman books. I mean it's always somebody's grandmother and she's always magical. And then there's the one where there's ... There's always a lot of curmudgeons and magical grandmotherly type women. There's no like ladies going to the store and going to work. The last book I just read, you know, it's about people having babies and relationship issues, but it's all stuff around people in their 30s and 40s. Even as early as in their 20s. There's really not a lot of compelling literature easily found or you kind of have to search for it a little bit. I found some, but I'm going to write a book and my protagonist is going to be a 52-year-old woman. It doesn't seem to be something that happens.

[00:06:46]

ANNE: Is this a conversation you've had with your fellow readers because I know that you are very active in your bookish community there in Denver.

MICHELLE: I have. Part of the issue is, the people that are part of that community with me are younger and so it hasn't been an issue for them or they haven't noticed it to be an issue. Of course I'm also nagging them about reading things by people of color, people who are LGBTQA, get out of your comfort zone so they're probably just hearing oh, here goes Michelle with another something else I need to read.

ANNE: This reminds me. Don't you have a hand in beginning the books in translation club at BookBar Denver?

[00:07:23]

MICHELLE: It's a lovely bookstore and it's a lovely neighborhood. It's really, really upper-middle class, highly educated white and everybody needs to move a little out of their comfort zone, I think, and read some stuff by people that maybe aren't like them. That's my deal and I always want people to kind of come along with me on any ideas I might have. [LAUGHS]

[00:07:45]

ANNE: So what are you going to be reading?

MICHELLE: The one that I loved the most is called *The Heart* and I think the author is Maylis M-A-Y-L-I-S and the last name is D-E-capital K-E-R-A-G-A-L and it's in French. This sounds weird, like how could this be compelling, but it's about some kids that are in a car accident and it's about an organ transplant, the whole steps from when we decide that this should be happening following that all the way through. And it sounds like it would be either deadly dull or you know, sappy, and it's neither. It's fascinating and it was so, so good. So that one. *The Patience Stone*. It's told from the point of view of an Afghani war widow, but her husband is not dead. He's actually alive and she's caring for him. She's basically talking to him the whole time, but he's comatose and she's talking about her life was and how her life will be after he dies. I suggested *Strange Weather in Tokyo*, a book called *Mount Pleasant*. He was nominated for a Nobel prize. So those are the four I've centered so far.

[00:08:51]

ANNE: That's quite a list.

MICHELLE: You know, I don't have any children and I don't really watch TV, so I do read a lot of books. [ANNE LAUGHS] I have some guilty Netflix, Amazon Prime pleasures, but otherwise I do read a lot of books. Which I'm not complaining. I'm happy.

ANNE: I am happy to hear it. You have said that you have a tendency to be attracted to books that are shiny and news. And I remember this because I really relate to this. It could be fun to read the shiny and new thing, but I know that you are striving to read a little differently in the year to come.

MICHELLE: Like for my New Year's resolution, I said that I gotta - I gotta cut back on buying books. Not that I want to not spend my money on books. I just have so many and I am always going to read that book, but then I see oh, we have ... this book just came out. And oh. So I end up buying a book. I finish the book I was reading, but by the time I'm ready to read that new book, something else has caught my eye. Whether it's from your show or from Book Right or from something that somebody said. At the bookstore or something I read. I always feel like I'm trying to read the newest thing. I even try to use the library and I had like literally 37 books on my table. They just did away with fines, but they kept sending me these little messages like, we miss our books! [ANNE LAUGHS] Send them back.

[00:10:12]

ANNE: So it sounds like you're accumulating books faster than you're reading them.

MICHELLE: I am. I mean I still read a ton, but yeah, I have a ton of books, probably seven book of the months that I haven't read because I was reading the books from Mrs. Darcy's book club, the bookstore book club, or I'm in another book group that's like a postal book club, like where we mail them back and forth. And so that's been good

because I actually just read a book that I know I had checked out for the library last year, but I had to turn it back in, so I did finish that book.

ANNE: What was it, Michelle?

[00:10:44]

MICHELLE: *Lucky Boy*.

ANNE: Oh, yes. I remember seeing that.

MICHELLE: Yeah, it was very good and I am very glad that I read it. I'm in two book groups and one is about immigration, and so that was the immigration group. Because it's a story of a woman who is undocumented, has a child that gets into the foster care system. Basically two people want this baby and we go on from there. And then the other group is basically exploring Canadian authors, so it's with some of the women in the Modern Mrs. Darcy book club who actually live in Canada. It's a little bit of a stretch because you know when we mail stuff, it's like \$47 to mail a couple books.

ANNE: Oh, gosh. [ANNE LAUGHS] So you have to choose them with care.

[00:11:24]

MICHELLE: They have it kind of figured out so you know, the United States people are basically mailing on to another United States person, but a couple people end up with the Canada-United States or the United States-Canada hook up. And so I've read some backlist Canadian authors, but I didn't even know they were backlist because I didn't really know anything about Canadian authors except Alice Monroe.

ANNE: Well I'm glad you have the opportunity to dive in. Now what I hear when talking to a lot of readers is they tend to prioritize what came in most recently over what's been around a long time and so the end result can be that you don't get to those things that weren't published in the last calendar year.

MICHELLE: I would have to agree with that. Just thinking of like what sort of stacked up that I would consider my most recent TBR, I mean it's only February. [MICHELLE LAUGHS] It's pretty big. I'm always sure I'm going to read it and I just can't get to it before something else catches my eye.

ANNE: All right. Well today then my mission is going to be throw some old books in your path that hopefully will catch your eye. They can be new and shiny to you, right? Even if they're not new and shiny in that section of the bookstore?

[00:12:30]

MICHELLE: Totally. I got a get off like LitHub and stop listening to Modern Mrs. Darcy [ANNE LAUGHS] and just stay home and read for about three years. I don't think that's going to happen, so yeah, give me some backlist. That'll be good.

[00:12:42]

ANNE: I don't know. That doesn't sound bad.

MICHELLE: No, it doesn't, but that pesky work thing and that kind of stuff.

ANNE: Ohhh.

MICHELLE: You know, food. Health insurance. [ANNE LAUGHS] It gets in the way.

ANNE: Tell us what you do by day.

MICHELLE: I am a public health nurse. I work for a big health department that's three big counties outside the Denver, and I work with people who are living with HIV and I also work with people who are experiencing homelessness.

[00:13:10]

ANNE: So they need you at work and it would probably be best for everyone if you didn't stay home and read for three years.

MICHELLE: That's the other thing. You know, I'm 58. People always say, oh, you can retire. So I'm like oh, that wouldn't be so bad. You could read. You can really only read for so many days before you have to actually get out and go for a walk. Go to the gym. So I think I'll be working longer, so that when I'm really old, I can stay home and read.

ANNE: For 11 hours a day.

MICHELLE: Exactly. I mean it's good. You can do 11 hours a day once but then that next day, you gotta get up and shower. [ANNE LAUGHS] Go to the grocery store. Maybe make some soup or something.

ANNE: That sounds like a healthy rhythm to me. All right, well in that case, we had better choose your books with care since you won't be reading two a day for the rest of your life.

MICHELLE: Depends on how compelling they are. I can ... I read really fast. Consequently why I don't remember as many details as other people do.

ANNE: Do you find you get wrapped up in the story and keep reading quickly because you can?

[00:14:02]

MICHELLE: You know, in four hours, I could probably get through I don't know, a 250-page book if it was really compelling. Depends on how dense it is. I mean, some things take longer than other things. Nonfiction always takes longer, but I do most of my nonfiction on audio.

ANNE: Oh, interesting.

[00:14:20]

MICHELLE: I can't do fiction on audio because for some reason I don't pay attention and like I'll be halfway down the street and some character who I think is new, she's been there for like the last three chapters but I just have zoned out. [ANNE LAUGHS] And I don't know why I don't do that with nonfiction 'cause it feels more like schoolish, I guess?

ANNE: You have to sit up and pay attention.

MICHELLE: Yeah.

ANNE: All right, well I can't wait to talk about your books. Are you ready to dive in?

MICHELLE: I am.

ANNE: Okay. Michelle, you know how this works. You are going to tell me three books you love, one you don't, and what you've been reading lately and we will talk about what you may enjoy reading next.

\*\*\*

[00:14:54]

*ANNE: Readers, I'm a bit of a nervous traveler, but I'm getting much better at it. And honestly one of the ways I've gotten better is by having the right gear. My Away suitcase has become one of my travel essentials.*

*It may sound silly that a suitcase makes me feel more comfortable when I fly, but it totally does. It's sturdy and easy to maneuver, so I don't worry in the terminal about managing my stuff. I can get everything where it needs to go. I can easily access the things I need to pull out at security because the zipper is in the middle of the bag and not on the top AND because one side zips completely closed so I know nothing is going to fall out everywhere. And of course I don't have that nervous look of someone searching for an outlet because my Away bag comes with a built in battery charger. I pop it out of my suitcase and into my purse just before boarding, so I know I'll always have the battery life to support listening to podcasts—or watching old episodes of The Office—for the entire flight, even if it's a long one.*

*If you want to travel easier check out the full line of Away sizes and colors. Then test out those four 360 degree spinner wheels, the patent-pending compression system, and the lightweight, impact resistant premium German polycarbonate. Away gives you a 100-Day trial to live with it, travel with it. At any point you can you can return it for a full refund.*

*They also offer free shipping on any Away order within the lower 48 states and a lifetime warranty where anything that breaks they will fix or replace it for you for life. Give Away a try the next time you go away.*

*For \$20 off a suitcase, visit [awaytravel.com/READNEXT](http://awaytravel.com/READNEXT) and use promo code READNEXT during checkout! That's [awaytravel.com/READNEXT](http://awaytravel.com/READNEXT) with the code READNEXT for \$20 off a suitcase.*

\*\*\*

*Readers, there's a joke in our family about assigning extra homework because that's something both my parents and Will's parents did to us. Well it's not just a joke. Last night at dinner, I recommended one of our kids beef up their school Spanish work by starting the Spanish course on the Great Courses Plus.*

*The Great Courses Plus is a streaming learning service that offers in-depth, reliable information on tons of different topics. Whether you're interested in learning a language or an instrument or you want to study history, religion, or literature in depth.*

*Each course is presented by renowned experts in their field. And now you have access to these teachers and their courses right from your home computer, smart tv or even your phone.*

*And with the Great Courses Plus you get unlimited access to literally thousands of lectures and courses.*

*When it comes to the reading life, I'm not a fan of the word "should", but I know many readers feel like they should read Shakespeare. If you feel like you should but the closest you ever get is a rewatching of 10 Things I Hate About You, perhaps you should check out the course "How to Read and Understand Shakespeare."*

*In this course professor Marc Conner shares the historical context behind Shakespeare's work and teaches you about his language usage and storytelling approaches. So whether you're reading history or comedy, tragedy or sonnets you'll get more out of each line of the Bard's work.*

*[00:17:46]*

*ANNE: Right now, What Should I Read Next listeners can get a Free Trial with unlimited access to their entire library of courses! So whether you want to assign your kids or yourself some homework you're going to get so much out of The Great Courses Plus.*

*Start your Free Trial today! Go to [TheGreatCoursesPlus.com/READNEXT](http://TheGreatCoursesPlus.com/READNEXT). That's [thegreatcoursesplus.com/READNEXT](http://thegreatcoursesplus.com/READNEXT).*

\*\*\*

[00:18:10]

ANNE: Let's start with your favorites. What is the first book you love?

MICHELLE: I could never come up with a favorite, but the first book I'm going to say is *Homegoing* by Yaa Gyasi. So now that's a backlist, correct? Two or three years ago?

ANNE: I get asked all the time what the definition of backlist is. Particularly because we have a category in the Modern Mrs. Darcy 2019 reading challenge for a backlist title from a favorite author. *Homegoing* is not brand new, but Yaa Gyasi does not have anything that's more recently released right now. But it's not shiny and new at this point.

MICHELLE: So I would say that is on my favorites. Then I'm going to cheat and I'm going to say all *the Kinsey Millhone mystery series* written by Sue Grafton. It could be just one giant book because I love Kinsey. I wanted to be Kinsey. And I could re-read Kinsey, might be like that comfort read what you guys talk about-

ANNE: Yeah.

[00:19:07]

MICHELLE: You could read Kinsey on an airplane. And then my third book will be *The Spirit Catches You When You Fall Down* by Anne Fadiman. That was sort of my gateway to really good strong narrative nonfiction.

ANNE: Did you strive to have a nice representation of different areas of interest in your reading life with these books? Because I can see how the same reader loves these books, but they are not similar.

MICHELLE: I try to come up with ideas of how I like to read and those are basically good quality literature, a quick easy but well written books like Kinsey Millhone and then some really good quality narrative nonfiction. So that is how I read.

ANNE: I like the way you summed that up. What is it that captured you about *Homegoing*? Let's start there.

[00:19:52]

MICHELLE: I loved the shifting point of views. Two half-sisters, I think, and one ends up married to the governor of Ghana and then the other one ends up down in the chambers and Ghana was the exit point for almost all of the slavery coming out of Africa and so it's this story of basically what happened to the families, the children of these women. It was just really well done and everything I knew about slavery was like the slavery that we knew about, like the civil war. What we had done in the United States. I didn't really know anything about the history and I'm always up for a good shifting point of view. There's a lot of different kinds of literary tropes that I'm not really into, but a shifting point of view I like a lot.

[00:20:40]

MICHELLE: And of course she was ... When I did read that, it was the newest, shiniest thing and she was all over the place and got a ton of praise which I think was definitely well deserved.

ANNE: The shiny and new led you in a wonderful direction then for this book. That's good to hear.

MICHELLE: That was when I had ... I was trying to read books by people of color, people of different life experiences than I do, and that was ... I think that was the year I really started to do that. The year that was published.

ANNE: Michelle, you mentioned that you really enjoy learning something new with this book. Is that a common theme in your reading life?

MICHELLE: It is. I like to learn something new and so I like nonfiction for learnings, but I really like fiction for like ... I never thought of something that way.

ANNE: New place, new time, new perspective.

[00:21:25]

MICHELLE: Exactly.

ANNE: We can work with that. Now tell me more about Sue Grafton because believe it or not, I have never read one of her books.

MICHELLE: Oh, man.

ANNE: I know. I am in Louisville, Kentucky so often, someone will find out that I'm a writer and they'll say, oh, you must have known Sue Grafton! With the assumption being that all writers know each other here in town, which would be lovely, but I don't and even worst than that, I've never read one of her Kinsey Millhone books. But just the way you were talking about her makes me want to go pick one up immediately. Tell me more.

[00:21:57]

MICHELLE: One of the reasons I love them is it's before computers, before DNA, before all that kind of stuff. It's more ... I don't, Sherlockian because she has clues and then Kinsey is maybe like an iconic class of a woman maybe in like the '70s. I mean she drove a Volkswagen. She wasn't married. She was an ex-policeman. She was just a pretty unique kind of woman for that time and she has like a very dry humor with a lot of giving someone the side-eye. She's definitely ... You're going to definitely know if she thinks somebody is playing her or is too big for their britches. [ANNE LAUGHS] But she's also really kind, but like she doesn't want you to know it. And she's smart. They're just like chocolate. I could easily read one of those. That would be a great comfort read for like ... I know you don't like to fly, for a plane ride.

[00:22:52]

ANNE: Noted. Michelle, we've talked about *The Spirit Catches You When You Fall Down* on the podcast before. What was it about this book that really connected with you?

MICHELLE: I had to read it when I was in graduate school, so it started out as a school book. That basically started the revolution in healthcare education around ... They use a term called cultural competence which I hate because you can never be competent in everybody's culture, and that's where I read it, when I was getting my Master's degree. It was so well written. It was like reading a novel, but you were learning a whole bunch of stuff and it was almost effortless to learn that stuff the way it was written. So it was just sorta like my gateway to some other, I'm thinking, *the Ghost Map*. Steven Johnson about cholera. Henrietta Lacks of course and then I started reading some local authors. Those books are so much more entertaining while you're learning things where there are some of those kind of books heavy like, I don't know if you know who Paul Farmer is. He runs an organization called Partners in Health and he writes a lot about infections, bacterias, and inequalities. He does a lot of work in developing countries and that is pretty heavy science. Whereas it's nice to kind of sink to like *The Spirit Catches You* when you know there's some references back there, but you can get the story and you don't have to keep going back and forth. So that's the sort of been my gateway to those kind of books.

[00:24:18]

ANNE: That's so interesting that you encountered it as part of your professional training because so many readers enjoy reading it knowing nothing about nursing.

MICHELLE: My office is right by the University of Colorado school of medicine. They teach it when you're a medical student in the second or third year. They didn't used to, but at least now they do.

ANNE: Michelle, tell me about a book that was not right for you.

MICHELLE: *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* by Ottessa Moshfegh.

ANNE: Tell me more.

[00:24:44]

MICHELLE: The reason I hated it was because I probably should have more compassion or sympathy for the character, but maybe it's like the work I do, the life I lead. So it's this young woman who has a lot of anxiety, but she's highly affluent. She lives in New York. She's educated. She has money. She has health insurance. And basically she wants to go to sleep for like a year. And so she somehow goes to all these physicians, and does all these ... She basically gets enough medication where she basically sleeps for a year. Her friends enable her to the point where they come and bring food. I mean at one point, she was talking about how like the hair on her legs was

as long as an animal because she'd been asleep, not out of her apartment for so long. I really tried to understand that she had mental health things. I mean I know it was fiction, but it just bugged me. So much to live for and so many things to do and this is what she chose. I just kinda hated it. But everybody at the bookstore loved it.

ANNE: I have not read this one myself, but I've heard mixed reviews about this but not meh reviews. People either loved it or said it was not for them at all.

MICHELLE: Yeah. I wonder how you could be kind of meh. [ANNE LAUGHS] Part of the reason why I read it was that author is a really ... She writes really well, I think. And then I was like, oh, are you kidding me? This story is terrible.

ANNE: Michelle, what are you reading right now?

[00:26:14]

MICHELLE: I just finished that *Lucky Boy*. Last night I started, only a few pages into Call Me Madre and it's by [author name] and it's our book for this month's Books in Translations and then I'm almost listening to *The Elephant in the Room* by Tommy Tomlinson. And I'm reading *Women Rowing North: Navigating Life's Currents and Flourishing as We Age*.

ANNE: As we consider what you may enjoy reading next is there anything you'd like specifically to be different in your reading life right now? Now we're going to look at finding books with women protagonists like you described earlier and we're going to be thinking about books where you can really learn what it's like to live in a different place, different time, different body, different point of view. Is there anything else we should add to that list, Michelle?

MICHELLE: That's really what I would like. That's what I'm hoping for. You're just giving me permission to not always have to be reading the newest, shiniest thing. So that's good too.

ANNE: You got it.

\*\*\*

[00:27:11]

*ANNE: Readers, if like Michelle, you are adding books to your TBR faster than you can finish the one in your hand then you should check out Blinkist. Blinkist takes the best selling non-fiction books and distills them down to their most impactful elements that you can then read or listen to in under 15 minutes.*

*The Blinkist library is huge - from classics like Susan Cain's Quiet to new releases like Digital Minimalism by Cal Newport. And they are constantly adding new titles so you're ALWAYS getting the most powerful ideas - in a made-for-mobile format.*

[00:27:41]

I listen to Blinkist to making tidying more pleasant. I get a clean kitchen and learn something new at the same time. Something new like how to negotiate. And I mean this. Negotiating is a skill we all need but few have the experience Chris Voss a former FBI hostage negotiator does. Check out the Blinks of his book *Never Split the Difference* and become a better negotiator in 15 minutes.

Make the most of your time with Blinkist and avoid towering piles of unread books and notes from your library saying they miss their books and want them back. 5 million people are using Blinkist to expand their minds 15 minutes at a time. You can be one of them.

Right now, for a limited time Blinkist has a special offer for *What Should I Read Next* listeners. Go to [Blinkist.com/READNEXT](https://Blinkist.com/READNEXT) to start your free 7-day trial. That's Blinkist - spelled B-L-I-N-K-I-S-T - [Blinkist.com/READNEXT](https://Blinkist.com/READNEXT) to start your free 7-day trial. Blinkist dot com slash READNEXT.

\*\*\*

[00:28:36]

ANNE: So you love *Homegoing* by Yaa Gyasi, which reads like a novel in stories, where you're constantly meeting new characters and jumping around in time and getting new perspectives within the same cohesive novel.

MICHELLE: Exactly.

ANNE: And you go from Ghana to the U.S. and it was shiny and new at the time and it worked out for you. You love *the Kinsey Millhone series* by Sue Grafton and people will know those as the alphabet mysteries.

MICHELLE: I don't know if that's what they're called though.

ANNE: But that's how people will know them.

MICHELLE: Yeah, A is for Alibi-

ANNE: If they're not familiar with Kinsey Millhone. So you have kind of a classic protagonist. You enjoy puzzling out the mysteries. It's kind of like Sherlock. She was a tough cookie with a good heart, is that fair?

MICHELLE: Exactly.

ANNE: And *The Spirit Catches You And You Fall Down* by Ann Fadiman. It's nonfiction that reads like a novel, had a strong personal connection to your work life. Really taught you a lot that has turned out to be valuable both professionally and personally.

[00:29:32]

MICHELLE: Exactly.

ANNE: But you didn't go for *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, which [ANNE LAUGHS] the phrasing on some of the reviews made me laugh. They would say that the book was intriguingly bizarre, but you didn't find it intriguing.

MICHELLE: I think we needed to do an intervention and get this woman some help. I don't like it.

ANNE: So you don't want to be reading books where you just want to yell at the character, make better choices.

MICHELLE: I do yell at characters like come on. Then usually it's part of the story arc and you know, something happens, but it didn't feel like anything was going on in *Rest and Relaxation*.

ANNE: Right. And I can see that you like strong writing. That's something you've explicitly said. It's evident in your choices, but you don't care about writing that's beautiful for its own sake, the story has to support it and be of interest to you.

MICHELLE: Yes.

[00:30:19]

ANNE: You mentioned that you could really count on one hand the books that you really enjoyed with older female protagonists that didn't have the main character that was a shrew or curmudgeon or a magical witch. What are some of those titles?

MICHELLE: So I read one that was called *like A Mule Bringing Ice Cream To the Sun* and I don't know what the author's name was, so that was one.

ANNE: I don't know that one, Michelle. I would remember that title.

MICHELLE: You know, there's some bookstore in London and it's some famous one where they used to deliver books like to the maharajji in India. Anyway so one year for Christmas, I gave myself a year's subscription like to their shelf book or like how everybody does that where they send out a book. And that was the first book they had sent. And this was in Hayward or Haymen bookstore in London.

[00:31:09]

ANNE: What a fun way to find something.

MICHELLE: Yeah, so it's a great book. And it's very slim. Maybe 200 pages, if that. Of course I loved *Our Souls At Night* by Kent Haruf.

[00:31:19]

ANNE: That's a good one.

MICHELLE: A lot of the writing that Wallace Stagner did. The older adults are actual adults. See you had mentioned when I met you, when I saw you about that, an Aquiline book, and you know the new shiny thing? It's still sitting in my TBR pile. [BOTH LAUGH]

ANNE: That's alternate side.

MICHELLE: Yeah.

ANNE: And when we talked about books before, I said, well what about *Clock Dance* by Anne Tyler? And you had strong feelings about this.

[00:31:43]

MICHELLE: Oh, yeah. So I also don't .... God, I have strong feelings about a lot of things, don't I? [MICHELLE LAUGHS] I like my women not to be ditzy and that's probably too strong of a word, but Anne Tyler's characters ... They're always pretty quirky and she just pass way into quirksdom for me and I really couldn't relate.

ANNE: You said that you didn't like that she was so passive in her own life. You wanted to see a character that had some agency.

MICHELLE: So I guess I expect a lot out of my female protagonists. I want them to be active. I want them to be ... You know, have control over their own lives.

ANNE: All right, Michelle, I have some ideas for you although you're making me nervous with that quirky talk. [MICHELLE LAUGHS]

[00:32:23]

MICHELLE: Well you know, like charity and crossing to safety.

ANNE: Oh, she's such a good one.

MICHELLE: I want those kind of people. Like the lady in *Our Souls At Night*. So what do you got?

ANNE: I don't know. That's a tough ask. Do you want to get back together in a month and talk about it?

MICHELLE: [LAUGHS] Seriously?

ANNE: That would be disappointing, wouldn't it?

[00:32:44]

MICHELLE: [LAUGHS] Well I think the readers will think, wait a minute, this is not how this is supposed to go.

ANNE: [LAUGHS] Well, everybody asks all the time, how much time is there between when you and I have that first part of the conversation and I come back with some ideas and the answer is... we're just talking.

MICHELLE: Once I figured that out, that's when I increased how much more impressed I was when you're like okay, not this. yeah, you got a lot going on.

ANNE: Oh, but is it going in the right direction? That is the question.

MICHELLE: You can never know. I love people who give me suggestions because you know, I'm looking for that book that can be like, oh, yeah, this is going to be one of my lifetime favorites.

ANNE: Well I don't know if this is last time favorite territory, but what do you know about *An Unnecessary Women* by Rabih Alameddine?

MICHELLE: Was it nominated for like The Booker or did it win The Booker? Or something? I remember when it was out and about and I for some reason I don't know why I didn't read it. Maybe I read a review that said it was hard? I don't know.

[00:33:37]

ANNE: Maybe it wasn't the right book for you, but maybe you just needed to know a little more about it. Maybe you weren't on your give me all the female protagonists kick yet.

MICHELLE: And that was probably several years ago, so yeah. Tell me about it.

ANNE: Okay. It does have the whiff of a prize winner about it, although I don't know specifics of the top of my head. And it's been out about five years.

MICHELLE: Okay.

ANNE: It's not brand new and shiny. And now you haven't specifically said that you love books about books or books about bookstores, but I do know that you are a passionate reader.

MICHELLE: I do like books about books and books about bookstores as long as it's not like a trope.

ANNE: It's not cutesy. It's not cutesy.

MICHELLE: Yeah.

[00:34:11]

ANNE: This is about a woman who is 72-years-old. She has blue hair. [MICHELLE LAUGHS] And there's a really funny narrative about that in the book. It's set in Beirut and I know that you enjoy learning new things about new places in situations and it takes place almost entirely in the apartment where, now that she and her husband are divorced, she lives alone. It's not a bookstore book, but she did used to run a bookstore in her professional life. But now she stays at home and the title here is important, *An Unnecessary Woman* because what Alameddine does is play with the idea of what is truly necessary to society and to yourself.

MICHELLE: Oh, yeah.

ANNE: Her life is full only of the things that she has chosen to put in it and a lot of that has to do with books. She is a constant reader. We were joking about reading 11 hours a day and she might actually do it. Each year, beginning on January 1st, she takes one of her favorite books and sets herself the task to translate it into Arabic.

MICHELLE: Wow.

[00:35:11]

ANNE: Which is not necessary except to her. What the author does is really play with the idea of what is essential. What does make a life? What kind of responsibility do we have to our self and to others? It's narrated in the first person. It doesn't have that shifting point of view that you like, but my hope is that the uniqueness of this voice will capture you and make you want to stick with it. She's really a complex character. It's a culturally diverse story. She's thoughtful and introspective in a way that I think you may find really engaging. it's leisurely paced, but not extremely slow. It's very strong writing in an unconventional, but I wouldn't call it quirky, style.

MICHELLE: Okay.

ANNE: How does that sound?

MICHELLE: That sounds good and now that you say to read it, I will actually go out and buy it and actually read it. [BOTH LAUGH] Instead of just put it on a shelf somewhere. Now whatever books you recommend, top of the TBR.

ANNE: Should that make me feel good or make me feel nervous? I think it makes me feel nervous.

MICHELLE: No, it should make you feel good 'cause then I'll actually have read them.

ANNE: Michelle, I want to go in an offbeat direction.

[00:36:15]

MICHELLE: Okay.

ANNE: So depending on what direction you choose to go with this author, it could either be gently off your beaten path or pretty far off your beaten path, but have you read much Larry McMurtry?

MICHELLE: Of course, *Lonesome Dove*.

[00:36:27]

ANNE: Oh, such a good one. When he writes a novel, he often includes a whole cast of characters that span the spectrum of society. Multiple ways so you often see older characters appear in his books. The specific one that I'm thinking of is like you said about your book in translation - it sounds weird like how could this be compelling? But I think it could be for you. So the book I have in mind is the last book in his five book series that begins with *The Last Picture Show*. You don't need to read them in order. I'm not asking you to read five books, but if you enjoy the fifth book, I think you're going to want to go back to the beginning and get to know the characters. Beginning with *the Last Picture Show*, you meet these characters that age three decades between book one and book five. By the time you get to the fifth book, our protagonist, a guy named Duane, he's in his 60s. He's retired. He's wealthy. He's come back to his little hometown of Thalia, Texas. And he is lonely. What I especially liked that McMurtry does in this book is he plays with this idea subtly putting it in the mouth of his characters, he feels like he's living on the margins now. Now that he's gotten older, he's not at the center of things like he was a couple of decades before. He didn't realize he was at the center all those years until he wasn't.

[00:37:46]

McMurtry's playing with themes of a small-town life. There are quirky characters in all McMurtry stories, but there are a lot of quirky characters here. When you said that Ann Tyler, I don't know, when it was going from quirky to wacky in a way that you didn't find endearing but kind of not for you, that made me go, eh, but I trust McMurtry and I trust you and these themes. There's an older woman. She's from Dallas, the big city, and she is loaded. At least she is believed to be as she is on paper and she has established this huge ranch with the goal of rescuing African black rhinos from extinction and that's where the title gets its name, and I understand that that sounds like a little like can we make a book out of this?

[00:38:31]

MICHELLE: It sounds very Texas-y.

ANNE: It does sound very Texas-y, doesn't it? And you're just right nearby in Colorado. And you like those authors that write about the west so well, like Stagner and Hera, you mentioned specifically.

MICHELLE: Uh-huh.

[00:38:43]

ANNE: So this billionaire heiress comes to town and she rocks Duane's world because he can't figure out what's going on, but he feels this unexpected kinship. This sounds so cheesy, I want you to know I know it. [MICHELLE LAUGHS] He feels this kinship with the rhinos that he does not expect. He does write in very short chapters in this book. You shift between scenes and perspectives very quickly. I think you would enjoy being kept on your toes like that and again he does write about big picture issues, but also just the importance and fragility of our human relationships in a way that's really profound. Even if he is talking about a rhino ranch. I'm going to stop there, Michelle. What do you think?

MICHELLE: Yeah. I would be willing to try that. Another book that I've never even heard of! When I think of Larry McMurtry, I think of *Lonesome Dove*.

ANNE: I'm just going to jump right in and ask if you've ever read *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan?

MICHELLE: And I'm going to have to say, "of course, I have!"

[00:39:37]

ANNE: Oh, good. Is that a good one in this context?

MICHELLE: Oh, yeah, no. I loved *The Joy Luck Club*.

ANNE: Multi-generational. There's so many layers to it as Tan examines issues of interpersonal relationships, mothers and daughters, and complicated family stuff, but also gender and race and class and culture, but she's very subtle and skilled in the way she does it. When I first read this, it lived on in my mind. After that is a huge book because it's such a vast story. She packs so much in, but it's not even 300 pages. That really surprised me when I came back to it recently.

MICHELLE: Wow. Yeah 'cause I would have thought 'cause like you said, a much bigger book, but then I also would have thought *Homegoing* was a much bigger book. 'cause there's a lot packed into those pages.

ANNE: It's not unpleasingly dense, but you feel like you're reading a story with some real substance to it.

MICHELLE: I mean it wasn't like trying to read *Vanity Fair* or something where like a whole bunch of extra stuff about people getting dressed and...

[00:40:33]

ANNE: [LAUGHS] I know what you mean. Have you read any Isabel Allende lately? Like *the House of the Spirits*?

MICHELLE: *House of Spirits*. I read her nonfiction one about her daughter. Her very earliest ones. I haven't read as many as the newer ones.

ANNE: You know what's interesting here is that we talked about *An Unnecessary Woman* and how the main character, Aaliya, in that book always begins the translation on January 1st. Well Isabel Allende is famous for always beginning a new book on January 8th.

MICHELLE: Oh!

ANNE: We're going to take it as a sign and go with it.

MICHELLE: Okay.

[00:41:07]

ANNE: As Allende has gotten older, her protagonists have gotten older as well and not just as peripheral to the story, but central to the story. I know that you don't want to read the shiny and new all the time, but I would really encourage you to pick back up with two of her more recent works. *The Japanese Lover* would be a good one as would, especially I think, *In The Midst of Winter*, which came out late 2017 or early 2018. Are you familiar with this story?

MICHELLE: It was a library book. One of those that didn't get read.

ANNE: So it must have caught your eye at one point.

MICHELLE: I hate to say, but I think it has a pretty cover. [LAUGHS]

ANNE: It does have a pretty cover! You don't have to-

MICHELLE: It has flowers on it. I thought, yeah. I can't even tell you what it was about or anything, but I had been on hold for it at the library and it comes in and then you got other stuff. You don't get it read.

ANNE: I do in fact know how that works.

MICHELLE: [LAUGHS] Exactly.

ANNE: Well, what happens in this book is it's set as you can guess, in the middle of winter. The title actually comes from Camus, in the midst of winter, I finally found there

was within me, an invincible summer. So you can imagine that even though this book starts in a hard place, that it is going to go hopeful places. Although I don't think it does so in a sappy or cheesy way. This story begins in Brooklyn. There's a horrible snowstorm. Because of the weather, there's a horrible traffic accident that brings together three very different people to carry out this pressing mission that happened because of this traffic accident that has unexpected and dire complications. It brings together two academics, a man and a woman, living in the same building. One is American and one is from Guatemala. She's a visiting professor. They each have complicated, and in part, tragic pasts. And they are pulled into the life of an undocumented immigrant who has gotten into all kinds of trouble or fear she's about to be because of this car accident. She has borrowed her employer's Lexus without telling them.

[00:43:03]

MICHELLE: Oh, yikes.

ANNE: Well that sounds bad, but it quickly goes from bad to worse because even more is going on and what's going on before this blizzard even got started. So you have an academic who is old and lonely, you have a 62-year-old visiting Guatemalan professor who is trying to find her way, trying to make a new life for herself as she takes this temporary job at NYU. And then you have this Guatemalan immigrant enter their lives and bring them all together. They have this common task. It's a scary sort of mission and the way that they bond and learn about each other, everything that they are being forced to deal very presently with in their lives right now, it's a really fast-moving story. I mean, as far as something deals with serious topics can be fun to read, it's really fun to be read. Allendale really makes you want to turn the pages and find out what's going to happen next. But it also really addresses serious themes like what it means to love and what it means to honor your family. What it means to be lonely and what it means to really connect with others at this specific stage that they each find themselves in right now in their lives. How does that sound?

MICHELLE: I would give that a shot!

ANNE: I'm happy to hear it. Okay, Michelle, of the books we talked about today, *An Unnecessary Woman* by Rabih Alameddine, *In The Midst of Winter* by Isabel Allendale, and *Rhino Ranch* by Larry McMurtry, what do you think you'll read next?

MICHELLE: Larry McMurtry 'cause it feels like I could read that more quickly than I could read *the Unnecessary Woman* book or *In The Midst of Winter*.

ANNE: Well I can't wait to hear what you think.

MICHELLE: [LAUGHS] I'll let you know.

ANNE: Michelle, thanks so much for talking books with me today.

MICHELLE: I'm so thrilled. Thank you so much. This was so much fun.

[CHEERFUL OUTRO MUSIC]

[00:44:49]

ANNE: Hey readers, I hope you enjoyed my discussion with Michelle, and I'd love to hear what YOU think she should read next. That page is at [whatshouldireadnextpodcast.com/175](http://whatshouldireadnextpodcast.com/175) (that's 175) and it's where you'll find the full list of titles we talked about today.

That's [whatshouldireadnextpodcast.com/175](http://whatshouldireadnextpodcast.com/175).

Next week I'm talking to Mallory O'Meara, the fabulous host of Reading Glasses podcast about how anxiety and the desire to know how things work have taken her reading life in a very interesting direction. It's not what I would have anticipated, and we have a GREAT time talking all about it: Here's a sneak peek.

[00:45:25]

MALLORY: I think I have a problem with internal conflict and I think that's why I like horror so much. I'm a very anxious person, so I have a hard time reading about other characters that are dealing with their own personal issues. I actually have a hard time with some romance novels 'cause some people will read them and they're like, oh, this is so amazing, but for me, it's very stressful. Especially regency romance where there's a lot of like etiquette issues. Ah, gosh, just when someone's in a situation and they're mortified because they didn't use the right fork. [ANNE LAUGHS] I get so vicariously stressed out. Like I can fight off a demon, but please don't make me fight off my own problems. [MALLORY LAUGHS]

[CHEERFUL OUTRO MUSIC]

[00:46:08]

ANNE: Subscribe now so you don't miss next week's episode, in Overcast, Stitcher, Spotify, or wherever you get your podcasts. We'll see you next week!

If you're on twitter, let me know there @AnneBogel. That is Anne with an E. b as in books -o-g-e-l. Tag us on instagram to share what YOU are reading. You can find me there at [annebogel](http://annebogel) and at [whatshouldireadnext](http://whatshouldireadnext). To get all the What Should I Read Next news and updates, visit [whatshouldireadnextpodcast.com/newsletter](http://whatshouldireadnextpodcast.com/newsletter) to sign up for our free weekly delivery.

[00:46:38]

ANNE: If you enjoy this podcast and want to get closer to the creative process, please check out our patreon at [patreon.com/whatshouldireadnext](http://patreon.com/whatshouldireadnext) to learn more about what happens behind the scenes, our plans for the future, and ways you can become involved. [patreon.com/whatshouldireadnext](http://patreon.com/whatshouldireadnext)

ANNE: Thanks to the people who make this show happen! What Should I Read Next is produced by Brenna Frederick, with sound design by Kellen Pechacek. Readers, that's it for this episode. Thanks so much for listening. And as Rainer Maria Rilke said, "ah, how good it is to be among people who are reading." Happy reading, everyone.