



**WSIRN Episode [number]: [Title]**  
***Hosted by Anne Bogel, with guest [name]***

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SHANNAN: I was scarred mentally. I tell everyone this. I was scarred mentally by *Little Women* when I was able to read that probably around 11 or 12.

ANNE: Ohhh.

[CHEERFUL INTRO MUSIC]

ANNE: Everyone is nodding, listening right now. [BOTH LAUGH]

ANNE: Hey readers. I'm Anne Bogel, and this is What Should I Read Next? Episode 179. 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.

Today's guest is Alabama reader Shannan Malone has broad taste and high standards, and when it comes to new releases, even authors she's loved in the past don't get a free pass... the new book has to earn her love. So today's episode goes out to all you eclectic readers and Shannan has another word for that, who love hopping between genres. We're covering the struggle of pinpointing what you dislike about a book that everyone else thinks is amazing, awkward characters for the introverted reader, Shannan's book club that connects moms near and far through literature, and of course much, much more.

Let's get to it.

Shannan, welcome to the show.

SHANNAN: Thank you for having me. It's an honor to be here. I'm totally geeking out right now.

ANNE: Oh. Well, I'm so excited to talk to you today and also to get into your books. I'm just rubbing my hands together, thinking ooh, I have so many questions.

SHANNAN: I will do my best to answer them. [ANNE LAUGHS] I'm hoping you can help me find some books that I will love.

ANNE: Shannan, we could tell from your submission form ... that form, listeners, is at [whatshouldireadnextpodcast.com/guest](http://whatshouldireadnextpodcast.com/guest), and from your history as a reader, that you read eclectically.

SHANNAN: Oh, yes. It's horrible. [BOTH LAUGH] My music is the same way because you would think, oh, the album. Beyoncé the whole album, you would like that. No, just two songs. Marc Anthony. Oh, the whole album. No, just two songs. Bruno Mars? Just the one song. And there's no cohesion about it. I can't tell you what that cohesion is, so with books, I'm hoping that you would tell me what the cohesion is. [BOTH LAUGH]

I need help because I am all over the place. I feel scattered.

[00:02:21]

ANNE: That's probably two ways of looking at it, right? The eclectic sounds good and interesting.

SHANNAN: Yes.

ANNE: Scattered is perhaps the less positive way.

SHANNAN: I'm an enneagram six and we tend to be more on the negative side of things than the positive. [BOTH LAUGH] So I'm constantly trying to reframe in my head to be more positive, so thank you for saying eclectic.

ANNE: Well what's the literary equivalent of only liking two songs on the Beyoncé album?

SHANNAN: Well you would think that you would like everyone's backlist, for example. The books that I have given you as the three books that I love are books that I want to read more of. But I have a classics book that I love list and that classics book that I love list is like all over the place.

One of them ... I'll just throw it out there ... is *Eat, Pray, Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert. You would think that I would enjoy everything she writes. No. [LAUGHS] I don't. So it's not like I can say, ooh, I love this author. Let me read their backlist and then I will most certainly enjoy it. No. It doesn't work that way.

ANNE: Elizabeth Gilbert, we love you. What didn't work for you from her backlist?

SHANNAN: I couldn't get through *The Signature of All Things*.

ANNE: Okay.

SHANNAN: And I don't know why. I've been trying to think about all the books that I really couldn't get through. I'm trying to find a unifying theme or reason why and I can't. Mind you, I am going to try to read *City of Angels*. I think it's *City of Angels* or *City of Girls*.

ANNE: Yes, that's her one coming in June. That I'm trying to get my hands on.

SHANNAN: I am too.

ANNE: Help me, Liz Gilbert. Help me.

[00:04:01]

SHANNAN: I put it on my wishlist with NetGalley. [ANNE LAUGHS] They were like, this is not available. I was like, okay. Anyway, but yeah, I don't know if I'm going to like it. I don't know if I'm going to love it even though I loved *Eat, Pray, Love*. My other classic all-time-favorite is *Quiet* by Susan Cain. That's nonfiction, kinda research oriented ... it seems to be no rhyme or reason to what I like. I just like what I like, and I know it when I read it or I know it when I hear it.

ANNE: We are going to mind map this thing, Shannan. [SHANNAN LAUGHS] We're going to pin it to the wall. We're going to go all beautiful mind on it with our string.

SHANNAN: Oh, awesome.

ANNE: We're going to figure it out.

SHANNAN: You know, enneagram sixes need, you know, gurus to help them. [LAUGHS] So you're my guru.

ANNE: Okay. For people who don't know the enneagram, why is it that so important for you as an enneagram six?

SHANNAN: Well enneagram sixes are generally the most insecure enneagrams that are on the face of the planet. [LAUGHS] We are the worst when it comes to things like this.

ANNE: Well what does that mean for your reading life? Does it make a difference that you can see and feel?

SHANNAN: I am just now becoming more assured of myself and hearing my own voice. And knowing what my voice is. For years, I looked to others for direction. Obediently followed down the path that was given to me. And of course I'm approaching 40, and that is not how you want to live your life now. [LAUGHS] I'm realizing that in the last 10 years or so. You know, you have to listen to your own inner knowing and your own inner compass, but at the same time, using people who are a little bit more knowledgeable about certain things to help you begin to know your inner knowing.

And this has been across all levels for me in the past few years. Spiritual, physical, mental. So I'm hoping to use this show and you as a resource to kind of get me on the reading path that feels authentic to me and that I don't feel so scattered. I just feel eclectic. [LAUGHS]

ANNE: A reading path that feels more authentic to you. So what I hear you saying is that being able to say, first of all, with confidence, I loved that book and I really don't care if you did too. [LAUGHS] But also to be able to say why? And to see what that says about you as a person and as a reader.

[00:06:16]

SHANNAN: That would be lovely.

ANNE: All right. Well that's just a small, small thing. [BOTH LAUGH] Okay, sometimes the truth about our reading lives or the rest of our lives comes in big, giant gulps and sometimes it comes in baby steps. So I feel confident that we can at least take a few baby steps today.

SHANNAN: You know, I feel pretty solid in my nonfiction reading life. I can spot those in an instant.

ANNE: With nonfiction, it's more true. Not completely true, but more true that what you see is what you get. With nonfiction, you pick up a book, it has a promise and the quality may differ, but more or less, the book is usually about what you expect the book to be about.

SHANNAN: Yes.

ANNE: But fiction, oh, there's so many variables.

SHANNAN: Yes. [LAUGHS] Very much so. And they may not end the story the way that you wanted the story to end. [ANNE LAUGHS] They will kill characters. I was scarred mentally ... I tell everyone this. I was scarred mentally by *Little Women* when I was able to read that probably around 11 or 12.

ANNE: Ohhh. Everyone is nodding, listening right now.

SHANNAN: [LAUGHS] Yeah. I mean, when Beth died, I was done. And I've coped somewhat, and this might be an enneagram six again, you know, needing the structure and knowing, planning what you're getting into. Like most books, I'm ashamed to say it, but I read the last chapter first. Because I want to know who is still alive at the end of the book. [ANNE LAUGHS] Before I get attached to all of these characters and one of them dies on me.

ANNE: Well that's how an editor would read, so you're reading like a pro really. [SHANNAN LAUGHS] This reminds me of my experience reading *Into Thin Air*, which is nonfiction. It's John Krakauer's story of climbing Everest and what was at the time, the most disaster season the mountain, when the most people died.

The book is dedicated to the people who died on the mountain in that season. And so I read the book flipping back and forth to the dedication, finding out, are they going to be okay? Are they going to be okay? And my husband ... because I finished it and I said, you have to read this book, so he thought that was sacrilegious. He just couldn't believe I had done it like that and he let the story unfold.

[00:08:20]

SHANNAN: I can't do that. In fact, I'm not going to see the Avengers: Endgame until I've read complete spoilers. I'm just not doing it. I want to know who is alive at the end of this movie. [BOTH LAUGH] And then I'll go and enjoy the movie. But I'm not going to be able to enjoy it if I'm sitting here going, someone's gonna die, someone's gonna die, someone's gonna die.

ANNE: No judgment here. Okay so you said there were two classics that you loved and they were nonfiction. *Eat, Pray, Love*, and *Quiet*. Do you have any fiction that would make the list?

SHANNAN: My all-time fiction classic is *Pride and Prejudice*. I loved Darcy. I loved Darcy before we were supposed to love Darcy. [ANNE LAUGHS] I felt like Jane Austen was trying to get us to hate Darcy, and I was like no, Darcy is just shy. He is just socially awkward. Like he's okay. He's really a good guy. I kept saying that in my mind as I was reading it, like no, Darcy's okay. You know, Wickham comes on the scene and does his thing, and I'm like, I don't trust that guy.

And then when Darcy proposed and it all went horribly wrong, and he wrote the letter, I was like yes! 'Cause that's what I do. When I have conversations that go awkward, I will write a letter and say ... I can express myself on paper than I can verbally. And I wrote so many letters to my now-husband trying to explain myself back when we were dating. [LAUGHS]

ANNE: Ohh.

SHANNAN: So when he did that, I was just like, oh yeah, I love him. I knew I loved him. He's ... there's nothing wrong with Darcy. Darcy's awesome. So that's my love of *Pride and Prejudice*, that character and his awkwardness and how he tries to begin to work out of it for Elizabeth's sake.

ANNE: How old were you when you first read it?

SHANNAN: Probably 12.

ANNE: And you still saw right through Wickham? I am so impressed, Shannan.

SHANNAN: Introverts tend to see things that other people kind of gloss over or don't really see. I think that also helped me with like, [MAKES DISAPPROVING NOISES] something's not right with that dude. [BOTH LAUGH]

ANNE: I'm so proud of your 12-year-old self. [SHANNAN LAUGHS] Shannan, if those are your all-time favorite classics, how did you arrive at the books that you chose for today?

SHANNAN: Okay, as I said, I am very good with my nonfiction picks. You know, memoirs and things like that. I pretty much zone in on them and I'm like you said, I'm real satisfied with them 'cause maybe they follow particular pattern, they deliver what they promised. Fiction, not so much. And I'm a writer also. I want to be entertained. I want to think about what I'm reading, but not too much. I want to experience new places and new things that I probably would not be able to experience, but that are still in my comfort zone. So I need help finding the books that I want to read more of. So those are the books that I wanted to talk about today.

[00:11:01]

ANNE: I can't wait to dive in. But first, I'd love to hear about the Rocket City Moms virtual book club.

SHANNAN: Ohhh. Yes. So that is an interesting story. My friend is a writer for RocketCityMom.com. It's in the Huntsville, Alabama. She was a writer for Rocket City Mom and she knew I wrote, so she let the editors read some of my material and the editor contacted me for lunch and said, what do you think Rocket City Mom is missing? And I said, well I love books. And she was like okay, I do too. And I said, maybe we could have a book club for moms. And she said, fantastic idea! You read the books and write the reviews [BOTH LAUGH] and I'm like ohhh, okay. I was quite nervous, but I am like in my third year of doing it and we meet on Facebook. It's virtual, so even if you can't meet, you can still participate. You know, I post the questions. People respond and then we go back in and talk about it and it doesn't have to be on that same day. It's a fantastic little club we got going. And we accept everyone. [LAUGHS] You don't have to be in the Rocket City.

We read ... some are exclusively about mothers, but some of them are not. Like *Everything, Everything*.

ANNE: Is that Nicola Yoon?

SHANNAN: Yes, Nicola Yoon.

So while that wasn't explicitly about mothers, it had, you know, a really good mother element to discuss. So yeah, we're always on the lookout for great picks. Liane Moriarty was a fave. We read *What Alice Forgot*.

ANNE: Ohhh.

SHANNAN: Which I loved.

ANNE: Well I was looking at your favorites list thinking, you know what would be good for Shannan? Is *What Alice Forgot*. Okay. I'm on the right track.

SHANNAN: Yes, yes. I absolutely love that. We read *Big Little Lies*. I did not love that one as much as *What Alice Forgot*. But it was a huge, huge favorite of the club. So we're always on the look out for great books and like I said, I struggle with my fiction picks, so I'm always looking for suggestions like that. We are going to discuss *Where We Belong* by Emily Giffin on ... next month.

I try to keep it eclectic, I guess is a good word. You know, diverse. Try to read authors of color, diversity is important to me. We are always looking for books that will make us think about the motherhood experience, help us learn about the motherhood experience, but don't necessarily drown us in the motherhood experience all the time. [ANNE LAUGHS] Because you know, reading can ... is an escape from the you know, laundry and diapers and all of that thing.

[00:13:31]

ANNE: I think I catch your drift. All right. Well, Shannan, I can't wait to dive into your favorites. Ooh, and not so favorites. We can't forget about those.

SHANNAN: I do have those. [LAUGHS]

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ANNE: You know how this works. You're going to tell me three books you love, one book you don't, and what you've been reading lately, and I hear you have a long list, and we will talk about what you may enjoy reading next. What's your first favorite?

[00:15:24]

SHANNAN: I cheated. [ANNE LAUGHS] Two by the same author.

ANNE: I'll allow that.

SHANNAN: [LAUGHS] Okay. *The Book of the Grail* and *The Bookman's Tale*. Both by Charlie Lovett. You're the one who helped me find these two.

ANNE: Oh. Well, I'm happy to hear that.

SHANNAN: I love these two books. I think I read the Jane Austen one first, and then I read *The Bookman's Tale* and I loved that title so much. Because it gave me a word to articulate my passion, like bookman. I looked it up in the dictionary and I was like, that's what I am! I'm a bookman. I'm a bookman. So if you go on my social media accounts and everything, it says bookman. Runner. Foodie.

ANNE: What does it mean to be a bookman?

SHANNAN: It's a person who loves books and reading.

ANNE: Well there you go.

SHANNAN: Yeah. And I even started a scholarship at my alma mater for people who are studying English and literature and I named it the bookman's scholarship.

ANNE: Oh, I love that.

SHANNAN: I love his literary adventures. You know, I want to live in Barchester. I mean, I just love everything about what he does in those books. The English countryside, I want to go. I feel like I'm there when he's talking about it and how he combines the past about a book into the present about a book. I love everything about it.

ANNE: Shannan, I'm making notes, so literary mystery, you like the way the past connects to the present. There's a little bit of romance in his stories ... do you like that?

SHANNAN: Yes, yes, yes. I do – I do like that and I think also I like the awkwardness of the book characters.

ANNE: [LAUGHS] Oh, that's true.

[00:16:53]

SHANNAN: I forget the name of the gentlemen in the most recent one, *The Book of the Grail*. I think his name was Alfred. I absolutely loved him as a character. The geeky, kind of awkward book people. A.J. Fikry is another one. Kind of awkward and pained but loves books.

ANNE: And that works for you. Okay.

SHANNAN: Yeah. And I also like to see my awkwardness and geekiness and goofiness on the page and know that it's not just me.

ANNE: [LAUGHS] I like that.

SHANNAN [LAUGHS] Yeah.

ANNE: Shannan, what did you pick for your next book?

SHANNAN: *Almost Sisters*.

ANNE: Ohh. I love her. Tell me more. How did this one end up on your list?

SHANNAN: Rocket City Mom read it. The book is awesome. Everyone needs to read this book. Everyone. I kid you not. The way she handled a very serious reality of our nation and its past in a very meaningful way, but it was enjoyable. It was so funny. I was laughing all the time. It's the best book. I want more of the characters. I think I actually might have reached out and asked her is there's a sequel? 'Cause I want to know more. [LAUGHS]

ANNE: So you like the way that she gave you serious issues with a hefty serving of snark to go with it.

SHANNAN: Yeah. It was funny. It was intelligent. I love the fact the heroine and her name escapes me. She's a graphic artist which is just unconventional but-

ANNE: Leia. It took me a minute.

SHANNAN: Leia.

ANNE: [LAUGHS] Her name's Leia.

SHANNAN: It was just amazing the way she pulled that book together. I'm still in awe of it. I still think about it.

ANNE: I'm afraid to ask this next question. But you've said that when you've read other author's backlist, they haven't consistently delivered a reading experience that you were glad you participated in. Do you see the implied question I'm afraid to ask?

[00:18:42]

SHANNAN: Yes. I read *Gods of Alabama* and I live in Alabama, so let's put it this way, as a writer I do realize that writers grow over time as writers. And you can tell the beginnings of shall we say greatness and where they have honed their craft and developed it. I could see the hints of the brilliance to me of *Almost Sisters* in *Gods of Alabama*. But it wasn't to me as good.

ANNE: Gotcha.

SHANNAN: But I saw elements of it. I was like ohh. I don't know. To me, it felt like *Almost Sisters* was the book that was there. And I've only read *Gods of Alabama*, but was she working up to that brilliance. That was displayed there. I did enjoy *Gods of Alabama*, but in my mind, it's nowhere near as good as *Almost Sisters*.

ANNE: Noted. Well some readers say that her first, *Gods in Alabama*, was her best. I really liked both and I want to think about why. In the *Almost Sisters*, she has a broader view I think of the south and is explicitly writing about the two souths.

SHANNAN: Yes.

ANNE: Is that something that really worked for you?

SHANNAN: Oh, yes. You know, I'm an African-American living in Alabama so I totally got everything that she was saying, including black church. Like cracking up laughing. [BOTH LAUGH] Southern church, yeah, yup. I totally got all of those jokes. Like mm-hmm. [ANNE LAUGHS] She nailed it on the head.

ANNE: Shannan, what rounds out your eclectic trio of favorites?

SHANNAN: *Circe* by Madeline Miller.

ANNE: Tell me more.

SHANNAN: English major, I guess that kind of goes without saying, had to read *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. Taylor Jenkins Reed actually said it best, so I'm going to quote her directly. "That Madeline Miller has reclaimed Circe's story from the men who told it before." I loved everything about that. Everything. Of course, studied *The Odyssey* and there's this quote unquote "witch" turning the men into pigs. You know, the reasoning behind why she was turning into pigs is like absolutely! [BOTH LAUGH] You know, like. I even mentioned it to the hubby, he was like, that makes a lot of sense. I think we need more women reclaiming and telling these stories.

I absolutely loved that. The writing is excellent. I read her other book first. Achilles.

[00:21:09]

ANNE: *The Song of Achilles*.

SHANNAN: *Song of Achilles*, I enjoyed that, tremendously. So when I saw that she had another one coming out, I was like yes! And I love that one even more. I'm anticipating her next book. [LAUGHS] Like write something else, please! [LAUGHS]

ANNE: I hear you. As a reader, I'm hoping she continues in this niche. If she doesn't, I'm interested in seeing what she does next, but.

SHANNAN: Yeah, but this is awesome. I loved how she took that character from *The Odyssey* and just explored it and developed it and you know, told the story from a woman's perspective. I'm also interested in reading *The Odyssey* that has been translated by a woman, Emily Wilson. That's going to be amazing.

ANNE: I'm curious to read that too and I haven't listened to it yet, but when I saw that Claire Danes narrates this new translation, I could not click download fast enough. And I haven't listened to it yet, but I'm actually about ready to start a new audiobook, Shannan, so this might be my one. I have a few waiting for me.

SHANNAN: I helped you pick your next book.

ANNE: [LAUGHS] Thank you for that. It happens all the time. I leave these episodes with a much longer to-be-read list every time, too. [SHANNAN LAUGHS] And after you know, nearly 200 episodes, it's kind of a problem.

SHANNAN: Yes.

ANNE: But as problems go, it's a nice one. I loved Claire Danes' narration of *The Handmaid's Tale*, so I know I like her as a reader and I'm really curious to experience this. And *Circe* works so well on audio. That's one of the things that also made me think oh, I'll do *The Odyssey* on audio also.

Shannan, tell me about a book that wasn't for you.

SHANNAN: *The Shadow of the Wind* by Carlos Ruiz Zafón. It was included in your 20 wonderful books and bookstores post that you wrote maybe ... or that was posted a month maybe? About a month ago.

ANNE: Yes, I know what you're talking about.

SHANNAN: Oh, well, I liked three or four of the list. I think. *A.J. Fikry, Penumbra's bookstore*. So I said okay, let me try *The Shadow of the Wind*. It appealed. It's ... I guess this where I need you to tell me why I did not like this book.

[00:23:09]

ANNE: My first question was going to be, are you able to articulate why? Can you put your finger on it?

SHANNAN: Well it lagged to me. Or there was so much happening, but nothing was resolving. It just kept layer upon layer upon layer of new information and nothing was explained. [LAUGHS] I was just like, yeah, no. I kept trying. I mean the writing is beautiful. I think it's because it's in translation, but I just could not get through it. I don't know. Maybe it was the season of my life that I'm in? And I'm not really a mystery person I don't think. I don't know? I didn't get that one for some reason.

ANNE: First of all, it's long. It's much longer than the other books you've chosen as favorites. Do you think that's coincidence or a reader preference?

SHANNAN: I thought about this when we were talking about the Elizabeth Gilbert book, *The Signature of All Things*.

ANNE: Mmm. Also long.

SHANNAN: That's also a longer book. So maybe it's length that I might struggle with on my fiction area.

ANNE: That's just the beginning. *The Book of the Grail, The Bookman's Tale*, Charlie Lovett writes literary mysteries also, but they are plot-driven. You know what's happening. It happens near the surface, you don't need to read between the lines. You're in the character's brain as they're figuring it out, but I think you feel comfortable that a resolution is in fact coming. And I think I'm seeing you really like endings that resolve.

SHANNAN: Yes.

ANNE: None of this ooh, I don't know. Decide for yourself kind of thing that some authors do. That's not for you, I don't think.

SHANNAN: No, I don't ... I don't think so. I think to some extent, enneagram six, again. You have too much of that in your own life. [ANNE LAUGHS] Movies that I watch tend to be superhero movies and action movies.

ANNE: Superhero and action.

SHANNAN: Yes. You know, I don't go there to learn life lessons. And I guess I'm not trying to read nonfiction for life lessons. I do that in my memoir and my nonfiction picks. But in my fiction picks, I really want to be entertained. To have a good experience. For it to be fun.

[00:25:19]

ANNE: Yes, I can totally see that in your favorites. And yet superhero movies have a very strong morale construct. That's one of the reason how they work. And that's something you pointed out in the *Almost Sisters*.

SHANNAN: Yes, and also *What Alice Forgot*. She did a brilliant job telling you not to forget what brought you together in a relationship and not letting things go south, you know, just gradually, until you find yourself in this place. But it was done in a very entertaining way.

ANNE: I don't think Joshilyn Jackson would have felt like she succeeded if you didn't also say and it was a bang-up good story.

SHANNAN: Yes. And so was *What Alice Forgot*.

ANNE: Okay. So you get to experience new places and new things, which *Shadow of the Wind* has, but I think that - that book was strong in atmosphere, but very, very light on plot.

SHANNAN: Yes.

ANNE: So there was a thread of something happening going through the story, but you don't read it because of what happens next. It does not have that element and I think that's what sets it apart is where you're going is unclear and it's murky and it's supposed to be. And I think murky is not an adjective that describes books you love. Tell me what you're reading now, Shannan.

SHANNAN: *The Next Right Thing* by Emily P. Freeman. I have an advanced reader's copy. I love everything about this book. The topic is amazing. Of course, enneagram six, decision fatigue. [LAUGHS] So this is just ringing true on so many levels. When I heard that she was writing the book, I ordered it on Amazon before it had cover art.

ANNE: That says a lot.

SHANNAN: You know, like I said, the podcast is excellent, but it's verbal. You know, it's auditory. I like to read it. So I knew I was going to love the book. And I have. I absolutely loved it. It's the book I needed when I was a teenager.

ANNE: I'm so glad to hear it.

SHANNAN: I wrote in my book review, it's one of those books that you will read again and again and you will probably read it through once and then go back and read it slowly and ponder it and turn it over in your head.

ANNE: What else are you reading now? This would be a good time to talk about Kondo.

[00:27:04]

SHANNAN: I'm reading *The Life Changing Magic of Tidying Up and Spark Joy* by Marie Kondo. I'm doing a "enjoy life" project on my blog and it took me three years to face my past and tidy my home. And I'm in the process of doing it. I've done clothes. I've done books. I have 198 books. I got rid of six because of course they all spark joy.

ANNE: [LAUGHS] I can relate to that.

SHANNAN: I did papers, and papers was a thing that was scaring me. There were literal tears going through the papers because I was looking at my dreams deferred. Things that I, you know, had said I wanted to do and hadn't done. Ironically I found a paper that I had written in 2011 that said go through your papers. [BOTH LAUGH] It was amazing, but I forced myself to go through the process and to keep going even though it was getting difficult. And I pretty much finished. I just had my pending box to go through as Marie says. It took me about a week and a half to do the papers. I had a lot of papers. [ANNE LAUGHS]

That evening after I finished, Brenna's email to invite me on the show was in my box.

ANNE: Oh, that's so fun.

SHANNAN: I was like it's magic! [LAUGHS] It is magic. She was right. It's magic. You tidy up your papers and you get on podcast you applied for three years ago. [LAUGHS]

ANNE: That's amazing.

SHANNAN: Yeah, it really is. It's changing my life. I feel like I've lost 20 pounds. I have not. But it feels like it. Getting my space together. I'm creating space for new experiences and new things and she's right.

ANNE: Shannan, what do you want to be different in your reading life? We know you want to be able to see more clearly why you love the books you love and what kinds of books really work for you.

SHANNAN: Yes. You have named it exactly. Life is too short. My TBR list is too long. [ANNE LAUGHS] I want to see that connection between *The Story Life of A.J. Fikry* and *Ensemble* by Aja Gabel. And *Daisy Jones and the Six* which I'm reading now and I'm enjoying it. It's eclectic as you said earlier. Yeah, it's confusing.

ANNE: So you think that if you could articulate this better, you'll be able to narrow down your massive TBR, I don't know. It sounds convincing and then I turn around and look at my bookshelves and I'm like ehh, well ... [LAUGHS] At least you're going to narrow it a little.

SHANNAN: Yes. You know and also, if like you see a connection, I think it'll be easier to spot ... you know the ones that are not for me and it'll be easy for me to get into it and say nope, this isn't for me. Next. And that would be helpful instead of trudging through and trudging through and trudging through and then going yeah, that wasn't and I will never get my life back. I'll never get those hours back.

[00:30:18]

ANNE: I'm ready. Are you ready, Shannan?

SHANNAN: Yes ma'am.

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ANNE: Okay, well, first of all the all-time favorite picks you mentioned and that was a bonus because I wasn't expecting them were *Eat, Pray, Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert, *Quiet* by Susan Cain, and *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen. Then the more recent books that delivered the reading experience you want more of in your life right now were Charlie Lovett's two novels, *The Lost Book of the Grail*, and *The Bookman's Tale*. *The Almost Sisters* by Joshilyn Jackson and *Circe* by Madeline Miller.

Shannan, you love a good story. We see that in *Eat, Pray, Love*. We see that in *Quiet*. I wasn't sure if a book about introversion would be boring honestly. I loved *Quiet*, but that's what I thought going in and I know that seems ironic because I am an introvert and I should probably read about it. And I did because when I sat down and I opened it, the first thing she does is tell you this story about an experience she had and you feel like you're right there in the room and you can feel the tension of what's happening. As an introvert, you feel kinda anxious of what she's experiencing. You don't know it's her, but now if you dive in, you'll know it's her. And it resolves in a way that I didn't expect. I was like oh, I did not see that journey you were taking me on. But I just was turning the pages. What happens next? What happens next? And that's what she does in the whole book. You said you liked Laura Vanderkam, very story driven. Practical, but these authors are illustrating the thing they want to teach you by telling you stories about people's experiences.

When we look at your contemporary favorites, they are good stories, well told. The writing doesn't get in the way. The writing is actually really good, but you said you liked the writing in *The Shadow of the Wind*, but that wasn't enough for you. But what I see here is books that are pretty compact, plot-driven. They don't have lots of beautiful words for the sake of having beautiful words. You want to know what's going to happen next. They resolve conclusively and they take you on a good ride. There aren't a lot of boring bits as Kate, our recent Australian guest said. Do you resonate with those descriptions?

[00:35:06]

SHANNAN: Absolutely. I mean lightbulbs have just started going off in my head. This makes so much sense. Especially your first point about even the nonfiction being very story-driven.

ANNE: Good stories. We're looking for good stories. This doesn't mean you can stand in a bookstore and look at the back of the book and recognize necessarily this is a good story, but you can talk to your fellow readers and use this terminology. Is it like this? Is it like ... if I like this author, do you think I'll like the book you're telling me about right now? You can do that. Like ... does it keep moving? Those are questions I would ask.

SHANNAN: Yeah.

ANNE: All right. Let's do some book recommendations.

SHANNAN: Awesome.

ANNE: Well I'm going to start with the one that came quickest to me. This is a new release and when it started becoming clear that you like good stories, they're going to keep you turning the pages, you don't want to get bogged down, and you really liked both Liane Moriarty and *the Almost Sisters*, serious issues with a side of snark. I thought of *The Mother-In-Law* by Sally Hepworth.

Is she an author you're familiar with?

SHANNAN: No, ma'am.

ANNE: Okay. I did this on audio, but you certainly don't have to. Ooh, this book would also work for your Rocket City Mom book club because it features a mother and a mother figure, depending on the characters. As you can probably guess on the title, *The Mother-In-Law*, but it's not specifically about mothering. The main relationship in this book is between an Australian, Melbourne dweller named Lucy and her mother-in-law. And this story is set into gear at the very beginning of the novel when police arrive at the Goodwin family home, everybody's having dinner, the kids are playing. Police knock on the door and they're like, this is not good. What is happening?

The officer is there to deliver the news that Lucy's mother-in-law has died unexpectedly. But they didn't just call, they showed up in person and it's because the death is suspicious. So it looks like Diana, the mother-in-law has committed suicide, but as the police start investigating, things are just not right. There is a note, but it's in a drawer. There's an empty bottle of something that could have been the cause of death next to her, but she doesn't have any in her system. To make matters more complicated, she told the whole family she had breast cancer, but an autopsy reveals that no, she was fine. So like what on earth is going on?

And then the story does that thing you have enjoyed in some of your other reads where it goes back and forth in time. So you get what's happening right now, Diana is dead. The police think it's suspicious and you go back 10 years when Lucy first meets her mother-in-law. A strong character. The family's very wealthy. And Lucy had always hoped to have the mother she never had or hasn't had for years because her mother died when she was very young, with her mother-in-law. That's something she really wanted as an adult and she found her cold relationship with Diana to be completely disappointing.

So then you keep hearing what's happening in the present day. There's some other family members and there's a business partner and there's lots of people it turns out, who could have an interest in Diana no longer being on this earth. But then as we go back in time, this story progresses on that timeline and we see Lucy's relationship with her mother-in-law develop.

I have to tell you, this is a domestic mystery and I was a little disappointed at the 70% mark 'cause I thought ugh, I never figure these things out and I figured this out. I guess ... I liked the way the story's being told, so I'm going to stick it out. I won't quit, but I was wrong. So I liked that. That she kept me guessing until the end.

Something that I especially like for you is that you get Diana's point of view in this story as well. And so you find out what's happening in her head and it doesn't match her actions. She's awkward in her actions. She's not awkward in her own mind. She explains why she does what she does. So what you get to do as a reader is see how Lucy portrays her mother-in-law's actions and how that differs from her mother-in-law's intentions, and as a reader and I think you as a reader, will find that really interesting.

SHANNAN: Mm-hmm. And it sounds like a wonderful pick for the Rocket City Mom book club.

ANNE: I'll let you be the judge of that, but I do think it sounds promising. Especially if you enjoyed Liane Moriarty because Hepworth is another Australian writer writing women's fiction that is serious but a little side of something else and there's a lot to talk about here. I mean it's about women and relationships and murder. Plenty to talk about.

SHANNAN: [LAUGHS] Great.

ANNE: All right that's my confident pick. Now we're branching out into more tenuous territory. I'm wondering about a novel that has been extraordinarily popular with book clubs since it was published more than five years ago, less than 10. It's historical fiction. It goes back and forth in time. This is a sweet story. It's not a snarky story. Are you okay with that, Shannan?

SHANNAN: Yes. I'm okay with sweet, I think.

ANNE: Okay, let me tell you about it and then we can see what you think. The book I'm thinking of is *Calling Me Home*. It's by Julie Kibler. She's a Texas author. I liked the way it raises issues that you've enjoyed reading about, but it is story, story, story. Good story and also it's about 300 pages which I know to be a good length for you. And the very beginning pages there's a

89-year-old woman. Her name is Isabelle and she asks the woman who cuts her hair, her name is Dory, to drive her from Texas to a funeral back in the Cincinnati area.

Isabelle is almost 90. She's white. Dory is a single mom. She's closer to 30. She's Black. And then as they hit the road, Isabelle's story unfolds from her past. You go back in time and you find out what happened back then in this different time and place that was so important that for the first time in 60 years, she has to go back and see.

So you find out in 1930s Kentucky, a much younger Isabelle fell in love with a Black man. It is a sweet story, but it's a hard story because of what they experience.

[00:40:50]

SHANNAN: I'm sure.

ANNE: So she takes you back to what it was like in 1930s, upper south to be Isabelle in that position. And there are people on their side and people that are not. It does tug at your heart strings in a way that you might feel is a little bit predictable, but it's a really good story, which is what makes me think that it might fit that category for you.

SHANNAN: All right.

ANNE: But is that fun? That's the question.

SHANNAN: I don't know. We'll have to see.

ANNE: Depends on how you feel about crying over your books.

SHANNAN: [LAUGHS] I prefer not to cry. [ANNE LAUGHS] But you know, it may be okay.

ANNE: But we're going to go a different direction for the next one.

SHANNAN: Okay.

ANNE: What do you know about Bali Kaur Jaswal, a Singaporean novelist. She wrote *Erotic Stories For Punjabi Widows*, which I have not read yet, but intend to.

SHANNAN: I've seen it everywhere. But I haven't read it.

ANNE: I am holding in my hands her next novel. It's called *The Unlikely Adventures of the Shergill Sisters*. This is a story of three sisters. They're on a mission. They're on almost a pilgrim their dying mother has sent them on. So they roll their eyes plenty about how like what a trick for mom to pull. How could we say no? We have to do this. Now we're stuck with each other. Because as they've gotten older, they don't get along.

And I think this book has the right amount of fun and zany while still having concerns that are grounded in reality that you and I can relate to as people that make it not just empty or ridiculous.

In this story, three sisters who are all at very different places in life. One has just lost her job in a comical, ridiculous, Internet meltdown way, and is becoming an Internet influencer. So that's just silly enough to be fun and lighthearted. One has gotten married to the perfect man through an arranged marriage online. You can imagine that perfect is not all what it turns out to be. And one is the more diligent, housewife in England. But they've come together. They have adventures. it does not go as planned.

They are dealing with serious things, but this not as a serious book. This is fast and fun and keeps you moving. You'll get to experience new places and new things and I think you'll really enjoy the journey. How does that sound?

[00:43:00]

SHANNAN: That sounds good. And what was the title again? I missed it.

ANNE: It's called *The Unlikely Adventures of the Shergill Sisters*. But it comes out on April 23rd.

SHANNAN: Okay. This has been great. I kind of have an idea of where I'm going to look for now which is great. So thank you.

ANNE: I'm so happy to hear that. Okay, so the books we talked about today are *The Mother-in-Law* by Sally Hepworth, *Calling Me Home* by Julie Kibler, and *The Unlikely Adventures of the Shergill Sisters* by Bauli Kaur Jaswal. Shannan, of those three books, what do you think you'll read next?

SHANNAN: I feel like I would want to read *The Unlikely Adventures of the Shergill Sisters* and I have placed a hold on it in my local library.

ANNE: You were quick. I can't wait to hear what you think. Thank you so much for talking books with me today.

SHANNAN: Thank you so much for having me. This has been amazing.

[CHEERFUL OUTRO MUSIC]

ANNE: Hey readers, I hope you enjoyed my discussion with Shannan, and I'd love to hear what YOU think she should read next. That page is at [whatshouldireadnextpodcast.com/179](http://whatshouldireadnextpodcast.com/179) and it's where you'll find the full list of titles we talked about today.

You can check out Shannan's blog at [www.shannanenjoyslife.com](http://www.shannanenjoyslife.com), that's Shannan with two A's S-H-A-N-N-A-N [shannanenjoyslife.com](http://shannanenjoyslife.com) and follow her on instagram @shannanenjoyslife.

Next week I'm talking to EXTREME reader Liberty Hardy about her 100% reading-centric schedule and we're combining our powers to recommend books for YOU, our listeners, as well as each other. Here's a sneak peek:

ANNE: Okay, so I've heard a rumor. Something about 600 books a year.

[00:44:50]

LIBERTY: Yes. My last couple of years, I've hit over 600 books. Personal best. [LAUGHS]

ANNE: How big of change was that for you compared to like five years ago?

LIBERTY: I was doing between two and 400, depending on how much was going on in my life. What was happening. The year that I discovered World of Warcraft, I read like 3-7 books [ANNE LAUGHS] So at the end of that year, I was like, goodbye World of Warcraft. People are like how do you read so much? How do you read so fast? And I wish I had like a secret answer for them. Like you eat chocolate cake and you can read all these books, but I don't. It's literally that I read ten to 17 hours a day. I sleep very little, which is really bad for you. Like don't try this at home, kids.

[ANNE LAUGHS]

[CHEERFUL OUTRO MUSIC]

LIBERTY: And I read all day.

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