



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

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[CHEERFUL INTRO MUSIC]

ANNE: Hey readers. I'm Anne Bogel, and this is What Should I Read Next? Episode 183. 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, Karuna Riazi, is here to talk about magic. The magic of carrying a book in your bag that can teleport you to another world, the magic of a beautiful translation, and the magical pairing of a hot cup of tea and a good story. We're also chatting about pen names, how to keep a book journal if you're a total perfectionist, and a host of other things, but at the root of it all is everyday magic, and the books I'm recommending Karuna pick up next are totally on-theme.

Let's get to it!

Karuna, welcome to the show.

KARUNA: It's wonderful to be here.

ANNE: Karuna, would you tell me a little bit about yourself?

KARUNA: Oh, sure. I like to describe myself as Muslim girl who reads too many books, drinks too much tea, and wears too many hats. [ANNE LAUGHS] And one of those hats is being the children's book author Karuna Riazi. My debut, *The Gauntlet*, came out from Simon & Schuster

Salaam Reads imprint in March 2017. It was one of their lead titles for the inaugural line of middle grades and picture books that came out from the imprint.

Besides that, I'm the eldest sister in my family. I love to bake. I love Korean dramas. I love reading, obviously. And I am constantly trying to find new things to love about the world around me.

[00:01:49]

ANNE: So, now basically everybody wants to pack their bags and head to your house for tea [KARUNA LAUGHS] for the afternoon.

KARUNA: Yeah. I - I really love baking sweet stuff. My parents have actually stopped me in recent months because they're just like, you're making everybody eat too much sugar. [ANNE LAUGHS] You need to knock it off.

ANNE: Any recent notable baking successes?

KARUNA: Well my speciality has kinda become lemon bars. They were something that I had eaten only once when I was younger and they were like the store-bought kind. So I've found a recipe years ago online, some wonderful blogger shared her family recipe and I think I kinda tweaked it a little bit and that's kinda become my signature. If we're having a family gathering, if we're going to dinner at somebody's house, I kinda whip those up and people kinda expect me to show up with them now, so God help me if I ever show up [LAUGHS] and I don't have them [ANNE LAUGHS] when someone's expecting them.

ANNE: Oh, you are singing my song. Whatever that citrus loving taste bud is, I have that.

KARUNA: Yes, I love citrus. It's just ... Especially this time of year and summer, it's just ... It makes me feel alive for some reason.

ANNE: What is it about baking and tea and books that go so nicely together for so many people?

KARUNA: It's just that cozy, home feeling. To me, you know, if I can put something in the oven and it's baking and I can smell it in the air and I'm making tea for myself, and then I'm reaching for either a book or my Kindle. And I, you know, have something that I really enjoying on, it just feels like everything is going to be all right. If I'm stressed, you know, [LAUGHS] it kinda reassures me that things are going to get better, things cannot be that bad when you have all this good stuff around you.

ANNE: That does sound good to me. Karuna, you mentioned that your two books, one is already out with the Salaam Reads imprint and the other is forthcoming, later this summer-

[00:03:34]

KARUNA: Yes.

ANNE: I have seen a little bit about that, but I would love to hear in your own words as one of the authors, what that means and why it's so groundbreaking for publishing.

KARUNA: Okay, so the Salaam Reads imprint is I believe the very first imprint devoted to American-Muslim authors and American-Muslim stories and headed by a Muslim-American editor, Zareen Jaffery of Simon & Schuster. She's an executive editor in the children's branch of the company. She's awesome. I actually have known Zareen for a couple of years because I used to work with We Need Diverse Books on the team back when it was a hashtag. And I ended up meeting her as a result of one of their events.

So pretty much it's really like a historical, wonderful thing because Simon & Schuster has put trust in Zareen to give her this branch to boost Muslim voices and they listen to her, you know, passion and love for her community. And her desire to see more of those stories that we're not seeing, you know, in mainstream children's publishing. In the past, these authors were often not given a chance or given the proper platform or given, you know, the sorta imprint environment where you have an editor who comes from the same background as you. And kind of understands what you're trying to do with your story, who your community is, who are the kids that you are writing for. I mean, honestly, I write for every kid. I love kids. I love, you know, their enthusiasm. I remember very vividly being a bookworm kid. So I'm writing for every kid, but I'm also writing for the Muslim girl I was who did not see herself on the cover of the book in the bookstore for years.

It's really amazing to have an editor who understands that longing and that desire and you know like, that vacuum that needs to be filled up with these important stories of growing up and having fun and you know, just being joyful like any other kid is really important, is really special. When Salaam Reads was announced, it was a huge deal. It was in the New York Times. And a fun story about that is I didn't tell any of my family members yet that I had a book deal. I think only my mother knew at that point and I was trying to keep it a secret for everybody else until I knew for sure it wasn't going to implode, because I'm that type of anxious person [ANNE LAUGHS] who's always waiting for the other shoe to drop.

And so it was in the New York Times, and I had friends, you know, messaging me and they were like, you know, have you seen about this Salaam Reads imprint? I'm sure you're very happy. I know you're friends with Zareen. And you know, people were passing it over because Karuna Riazi is my pen name. People did not know that was me yet.

So I was kind of you know, having to keep my lips sealed when someone said, doesn't this story, *The Gauntlet*, sound cool? I was like, mm-hmm. Yeah, yeah. [ANNE LAUGHS] That does sound great. They're like, oh, it sounds like fantasy, like you know, don't you love fantasy? I was just like uh-huh. Yeah. That's, yeah, that's gonna be so cool. So it was really awkward to have

the announcement go out and want to scream about it. You know, like I'm in the New York Times. One of the very first books to come out from this historic imprint but at the same time I was trying to like, you know, keep it cool and wait to see what happened and keep it to myself.

[00:06:36]

ANNE: How did you share the news?

KARUNA: With my father, I waited until the advanced reader's copies were out and then I presented him with one and he was so happy. After I told my dad, which was like, you know, of course it was a couple of months after that because it was the advanced reader's copy. Then I told like his side of the family, all of my cousins on the Bangladeshi side and on my mom's side, I have my grandma and my aunt and they were like, you know, really excited but they were like calm about it. My grandma's exact words, "Of course you wrote a book. Out of all my grandkids, you're the one who would write a book." So-

ANNE: [LAUGHS] Oh, I like her.

KARUNA: Yeah. She's - she's very sweet and very supportive.

ANNE: How did you choose your pen name?

KARUNA: Well, my pen name is actually technically one of my names. Karuna is my Bangladeshi nickname. I keep saying Bangladeshi side, so I'm just going to explain real quickly that I'm biracial and my dad is from Bangladesh and my mom is African-American and Native American. Karuna is my nickname from his side of the family and is derived from my paternal grandmother's name and it means "mercy."

So since I was already honoring one paternal grandparent, I just went with the last name Riazi, which was my paternal grandfather's name and it just sorta worked.

ANNE: Over the years, as I've learned more about publishing, I've been surprised to find out how often pen names are used or if not a true pseudonym, how authors who are publishing in different genres will often have subtle differences in their names for each. Like someone may use a middle initial for their middle grade and not for their YA. I have a friend who went from romance to women's fiction and she has totally different names for each. You wouldn't know them to be the same person.

People who know her as the author of one series call her one thing and people who know her as a writer in that other genre call her another, which seems so funny when you're there in person, but it happens all the time and I just don't think that's something a lot of listeners would know.

KARUNA: Yes.

[00:08:30]

ANNE: We like to know the insider scoop of the industry, so.

KARUNA: Well I think everybody chooses pen names for different reasons. I've seen some people saying that you know, yes, they want to be able to compartmentalize and I'm a person who loves to be able to do, so like I said, that was part of the reason why. I was like oh yeah, pen name, I can kinda have, you know, like sort out and what if I want to write an adult book in the future? And you know, I want to have one name free to be able to separate like that.

I do know at least one friend who chose a pen name because that was the name she'd always wanted. [ANNE LAUGHS] Um, so.

ANNE: That's a great reason.

KARUNA: Yeah, I think it really depends on the author. I think that we're not seeing so much as in the case of J.K. Rowling that you're now changing your name to be able to get a foot in the door as a woman, which is a good thing. I don't really see people doing that as much. I'm not sure how it is over in adult literary or adult fantasy if that's still like, you know, a motivation for certain women to use their initials, but at the same time, recently I was at the New York Public Library event for my friend G. Willow Wilson, and N.K. Jemisin.

And so someone in the audience actually asked both of them why they went by their initials. And G. Willow Wilson said she went by her initials because she never went by her first name. She always had gone by Willow, so it felt natural. And N.K. Jemisin just said, um, I forgot what her reasoning was, but the motivation for both of them wasn't because they were women writing adult fantasy and trying to like, you know, not be cancelled out because they were women. It was because they both had personal reasons or personal attachments to the name, which was kinda interesting because I think the audience member who asked was concerned that they had used their initials because of some sexism or prejudice within the industry.

ANNE: Interesting. I remember reading an article a summer or two ago that said with domestic suspense being such a hot genre and so popular among women, several male authors had adopted the initials.

KARUNA: Yeah, I - I had heard that as well.

ANNE: Definitely not the norm for the whole pseudonym thing.

KARUNA: Yeah.

ANNE: Karuna, before you were a writer, you were a reader. What is your reading life like?

KARUNA: I feel like my reading life has kinda come back to life. There were a few years, particularly high school through undergrad where I was still reading because I was an English major, I loved English in school, but somehow I wasn't reading as voraciously as I did than when I was younger.

And when I was younger, I still have gained a reputation with my mom's friends as being an utter bookworm. Not just a kid who has a book like you know, in her hands, but a kid who has a book in her hands at all times, whenever you see her, however you see her. She somehow inexplicable has another book.

I could finish a book within an hour, you know, and I guess part of it was that I was homeschooled at the time, so you know, my mom always encouraged that and I was really blessed to have a mom that didn't like, you know, say, can't you be doing something else? Well she did say that sometimes, but [ANNE LAUGHS] both my parents have said that at times. But you know, more often than not, it was like well good, at least she's, you know, not watching TV. At least she's not getting herself into trouble. She's just sitting and she's reading, so you know, what's wrong with that?

When I was in high school, I even had a book under the table at my friend's wedding reception. The bride herself thought it was funny and she was like that was very you to like [LAUGHS] you know, have the book under the table at the wedding reception.

[00:11:50]

ANNE: I would love to see a photo, and I would love to know what book that was.

KARUNA: I want to say it was one of Maggie Stiefvater's, probably from her first series, the wolf series. *Shiver*. I think it was *Shiver* because I've always been into kinda spellbinding, YA contemporary fantasy. I like to call myself an equal opportunity reader. [ANNE LAUGHS] If it's something that I really enjoy, no matter what genre it's in, I'm probably going to read it or you know, at least give it a try before I pass it up to someone else.

So yeah, pretty much, I read a lot when I was younger and then when I got into high school and I got into college and I was reading all, you know, the stuff they expect you to read as an English major. I kinda lapsed because I had so much I had to keep up with anyway. You know, I always felt guilty about it and I was like, well, at least I'm still reading. At least I'm still like turning around all these critical essays that are making me appreciate reading more and this field I'm in.

But at the same time, I kinda lost that sense of reading for pleasure. So the past two years in particular, I've been kinda relying on both your challenge with Modern Mrs. Darcy and the Book Riot Read Harder challenge. That especially has been helping because like you know, every year they kinda pick prompts that push you out of your comfort zone. Last year for instance, I found that I really love reading nonfiction and that ended up helping me get back on track.

I think last year I read 112 books for the year and it was the first time in years I had read that much over a year.

[00:13:17]

ANNE: That's great. And you know, I'm always saying, quality, not quantity.

KARUNA: Yes.

ANNE: But if you want to read more, and you've read more, I'm really glad that worked.

KARUNA: I usually set my, um, Goodreads challenge to the 100s and then I'm just like, well I'm not going to hit that anyway. But I was astonished when I looked back and I had kept a reading log and I looked back and I was like, wow, I did really read a lot this year. And more importantly, I enjoyed the majority of what I read because I finally gave up that guilt of, you know, saying oh, I didn't finish that. I should try to finish it. And now if I realize a book's not going well with me, if I'm not in the mood, or it's just dragging, I just write down the title on the list I keep and if I come back to it a second time, it's still not working, then well I know to give it up. I'm not letting that slow me down by trying to slog through a book that I'm not going to finish reading and I know it.

ANNE: Karuna, I love talking to equal opportunity readers because it's such a delight to talk to a reader who enjoys lots of different kinds of books. But there's also a challenge. I almost said problem, but there's a challenge with being an equal opportunity reader and that is with so many options, with so many potential next reads, it can be very hard to actually narrow it down and choose. How do you choose what you're going to read next?

KARUNA: Oh, that's difficult. Especially since recently with like a lot of deadlines and a lot of decisions to make. I've kinda slowed down on my reading for the year. I end up kinda flipping through ... The other night it was almost an hour trying to figure out what am I actually in the mood for? Too many choices, it can become extremely overwhelming. I get frustrated, you know, talking back and forth with myself, well, what do you want to read? And I'm like, I don't know. I don't know what I'm in the mood for. And it becomes this kinda internal back and forth that makes me forget why I want to read in the first place, which was to enjoy myself.

ANNE: Does that mean that you don't particularly enjoy the deliberation?

KARUNA: I don't. I'm a very indecisive person. When someone tells me, you decide, I freeze up and it feels like a life or death choice. Even over something as small as what book are you going to be reading right now? Also I'm kinda a mood reader. So it always feels like I should be matching my book to my mood, and if I don't match it to my mood, then what am I doing?

ANNE: I completely understand wanting to be in the mood for a certain title when you pick it up, but do you ever find that once you're actually reading, your mood can accommodate the title?

[00:15:46]

KARUNA: Yes. A few times recently I've gone oh well, I'm way too sad for this book. Recently I was reading *We Are Okay* by Nina LaCour, which is a YA contemporary and it's very beautiful and it's also very sad because the protagonist is dealing with the death of her beloved grandfather and some family secrets as well that have come to light, and also the return in her life of her best friend, who she had distanced herself from.

So you know, like, there's a lot of emotion and complexity going on in the story. And it's beautifully written, so you, you know, feel everything to the heart. And so I started reading that and I was in the mood myself and I was like, oh my God, this is going to bring my mood down. Further than it already was and maybe I should stop. Maybe I should put this aside for another day when I'm happier, and it's less likely to affect me that much, but then the language was so beautiful and the way she crafted it was just so gripping that I ended up reading the whole thing. And I looked up and realized that she had ended on such a hopeful, peaceful note that I actually myself felt more at peace than I had when I first started the book.

ANNE: So, Karuna, you said that choosing your next read was such a small thing. And I understand how we're not ending world hunger or anything by choosing your next book.

KARUNA: Yeah.

ANNE: But it also feels like a really big thing to the life of the individual reader.

KARUNA: Yes, it really does.

ANNE: I'm assuming that your experience with *We Are Okay* was not the only time where you finished the book and went [SIGHS]. This was a good time in my life to read this. Does experiencing that feeling at all free you up when you're choosing again? Maybe to lower the stakes to trust that it will be okay or is that just a little bit of Pollyanna in me?

KARUNA: Definitely because when I read *We Are Okay*, I'm actively drafting a YA novel and one of my biggest weaknesses that I'm always trying to do better about is that if I read YA while I'm writing a YA, even if it's not the same genre, I end up comparing myself to that author, without keeping in mind that this is a finished copy. It's been edited, you know, this author has been working on this for years and I'm still in, like, you know, maybe draft one or draft two. I compare myself.

So I was not reading as much YA at that time either and it kinda really liberated me to the point that the next few books I read over that month were YA again and it didn't affect my drafting at all.

ANNE: Good. I am really glad to hear that. Just because even though I completely understand that authors need to be careful about what they read while they're writing, this is different for

different people for different reasons, I get all that. But I still like to hear that reading was not harmful to your morale or your writing life. Because how sad? [ANNE LAUGH]

[00:18:23]

KARUNA: Yes.

ANNE: Karuna, I am dying to get more into the specifics of your reading life. Are you ready to talk about your loves and not so loves?

KARUNA: Oh, sure.

ANNE: Readers, when Karuna said she has a go-to recipe for a special treat that everyone expects her to bring to get-togethers I knew exactly what she was talking about. I love having routines and easy “go-tos” like that. Because it makes things so easy and cuts down on me overthinking what to make.

Do you know what else makes my life easier and helps me cut down on overthinking? PrepDish.

PrepDish is the healthy, whole food based, meal planning subscription that delivers weekly meal plans right to your inbox. And when I say meal plans I mean they already planned out a whole week’s worth of delicious recipes so that I don’t have to think something up each night and I don’t fall back on my old standbys.

And nothing could be easier than PrepDish’s shop once, prep once philosophy. Print out your plan, do all of your shopping, and then in one go you can do all of your chopping, marinating, and prepping for all of the meals. Save time on prep day by doing it together and then save time each night as you start dinner several steps ahead.

You can take care of your meal planning for the whole year RIGHT NOW with a premium PrepDish subscription. They offer a variety of meal plans to fit any lifestyle including Paleo, Gluten Free, and Keto. If you’ve been curious about Keto, you can now try it with PrepDish’s Keto menu free for two weeks. Get recipes for meals and fat bombs, those high calorie snacks that keep your carb intake low.

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Readers, you know I have broad reading tastes including some slightly odd nonfiction interests like say urban planning. My curiosity doesn't just apply to books, I also love The Great Courses Plus for its breadth of topics and the expertise of its professors.

The Great Courses Plus is a streaming learning service, one that you can watch or listen to on your phone, computer, or smart TV.

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Whether you're interested in learning a language, or an instrument, or you want to study history, religion, or literature in depth, they have a course for you. And with the Great Courses Plus you get unlimited access to literally thousands of lectures and courses – perfect for those of us with rather broad interests.

At my house we've watched a lecture series on chess, taken Spanish lessons, and we just queued up a course on World War II.

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Take your knowledge to the next level with The Great Courses Plus. Right now, they are giving What Should I Read Next listeners this fantastic, limited time offer: A Full Month of unlimited access for FREE.

But, to start your FREE Month, you must sign up through this special URL.

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Remember: TheGreatCoursesPlus.com/READNEXT.

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

What did you choose for your first favorite?

[00:21:47]

KARUNA: *Mr Fox* by Helen Oyeyemi. It is an adult literary. I would also say it's magical realism and this was the very first book I read by Helen Oyeyemi; it was also ... I think it was the second

adult contemporary fantasy or magical realism that I had checked out from the library, on a whim, because I loved the title *Mr Fox*.

It - the cover has, you know, this fox man and this fox woman, you know, like in old-fashioned clothing on the front cover. And so I assumed it was implying like, you know, the old fairytale *Mr. Fox* which I think is a Grimm's fairytale. Okay, this sounds really fascinating. And then I started reading it, and it's about this man who is an author who looks up one day and he finds his muse, Mary, standing next to him. That's where it starts getting really surreal because this is his muse, from his head, and she comes to visit him.

I - I'm trying so hard not to give the whole book away because it's one of those books where you read it and you wonder if you're dreaming most of it because it's so beautifully written and it's so surreal. There's just so much going on in it. There are these little stories within the story, and then sometimes there's even stories within those.

Helen Oyeyemi is of Nigerian descent if I recall correctly, so she does work in images from her own heritage into these traditional European fairy tales that she's reworking. It also becomes this internalized commentary on the patriarchy. I feel like all of her books to date just have that sorta like wonderful, haunting fairytale aesthetic to it while also giving this kind of deeper commentary on societal issues.

[00:23:32]

ANNE: Oyeyemi, especially this one, is very high concept. It's very imaginative.

KARUNA: Yes.

ANNE: And it's this really interesting combination of heavy and light because she's writing about serious issues, but she does it in such a almost deceptively whimsical way.

KARUNA: Magical feels like a cliché word, especially since at some points, it gets a little you know, dark and twisted. But magical is how it feels to me every time I read it. Like you know, I reread it and try to find the seams where she sewed it together.

ANNE: When your muse comes to life, I - I don't know what the other word is for it. I think you can use magical.

KARUNA: Yeah.

ANNE: What did you choose for your second book?

KARUNA: My second book was *Bel Canto* by Ann Patchett, which is also, I've seen people classified as magical realism. To me, it kind of read in the same sense as *Mr Fox*, um, like a fairytale. And this was actually I think one of the very first adult literary titles I've ever read. Since

I was a teenager, I was like, I love YA, I love middle grade and poo-poo to adults. I have all I need right here. [ANNE LAUGHS] But a friend was talking to me about this book ... I wish I could remember who recommended it because I always like to go back and thank people, but she said this was just utterly magical and you will love it.

And I did love it. I cried at the end and I did hate that friend for a little bit because I was like, you didn't tell me [ANNE LAUGHS] I was going to be emotional at the end of this. For those who haven't read it, again, I really don't want to spoil it because it's one of those things you have to experience for yourself. But there's this gathering to listen to this famous opera singer, I believe there's some sort of hostage situation where everybody, including the opera singer, at this party, are taken hostage. It's some sort of like South American conflict kind of like there's a coup going on and there's a dictator who's being overthrown in some way.

It sounds so, you know, simple when you read the summary and I think Ann Patchett knew what she was doing when she wrote her cover copy. Because she does not elude in anyway to like, you know, the magical and fantastical things that start happening around the opera singer's voice and around her singing and around the people she touches with her voice and the people who are held hostage with her. And how all these emotional bonds and connections start manifesting.

Even just talking about it, I just want to start reading it again because it has been a while. And I think Ann Patchett, like Helen Oyeyemi, is another author I look towards and I really aspire to write like because it reminds me of being a kid and reading fairy tales where bizarre, beautiful things happen and you just are left with this sense of wonder that it could happen at all.

[00:26:11]

ANNE: Well I'm glad that you described a little bit of *Bel Canto* to us although I totally understanding wanting to avoid spoilers because I thought the set up for that story was just too good. I love the way Patchett sets up her story and her inspiration was a real life, in the news hostage crisis that happened maybe five years before she wrote her book. The little details are so great. The story takes place in an unnamed, South American country. We never find out where precisely it was.

I remember from Spanish class when I was a kid how much some South American countries love their soap operas and it's actually very important to the plot of the novel that the president of the country is staying in on Tuesday night. He doesn't come to this dinner where the hostage crisis ensues because he is home, watching his soap, 'cause it's a big episode and he wants to see what happens next. And this is before TiVo and all that.

Oh, it was such a fun story. I did not at all ... Wait, hold on. First I just called a hostage crises book fun. [KARUNA LAUGHS] What I mean is it's such a captivating reading experience. I just wanted to see what happened and I loved the way she told the story. But I did not remember any of the magical stuff. I've been thinking this is a book I might want to revisit and I will

definitely be doing with that eye as I do. And you know Ann Patchett has a new book coming out in the fall.

[00:27:29]

KARUNA: Yes. I just saw it and I was like, oh, my gosh. I haven't read a book by her in a couple of years, so I was really excited.

ANNE: You've got a new one on the way. What did you choose to round out your favorites?

KARUNA: The last one of my favorites is one that was recommended by my friend Nafiza Azad who has her debut *The Candle and the Flame*, which is a very intense YA fantasy, which is coming out May. And she, like me, loves books in translation so this was a recommendation from her and is *Strange Weather in Tokyo* by Hiromi Kawakami. I looked at the book copy before we started this interview just to make sure I remembered the story correctly if I had to summarize it.

The two words they chose were sweet and heart wrenching and I would say that is very accurate. If any listeners have watched a Japanese drama recently, a lot of stories have this sort of sweet, heart wrenching but also sometimes a little bit absurd premise going on. And *Strange Weather in Tokyo* kinda has that bittersweet, sometimes funny sense to it.

This young woman goes to a restaurant one night and she meets one of her old teachers. She just calls him Sensei. Even though they weren't as connected when she was in school, overtime she keeps, you know, running into him. They keep spending time together and it is one of those stories where yes, I asked my friend, does she fall in love with him? And it's like well, it's more than that. It's about how you appreciate people more after years and the connections we make with people. Even if she's a young woman, it's also kinda a coming-of-age, you know, like understanding yourself, understanding who you are.

There is some surrealism to it because I noticed that the books I leaned towards does have some surrealism. But it's also just emotionally compelling and engrossing. Where you just feel like you have to keep reading to see what's going to happen to these characters, if they'll be able to say the things to each other that they want to say. This world where it does feel very real and these are people you could bump into if you went to Japan and you went into a restaurant and you saw a young lady sitting with her older teacher in the corner talking to each other.

ANNE: I just read this for the first time in the fall and really enjoyed it. What is it about books in translation, Karuna?

KARUNA: I have been trying to understand that in myself because I've had varied loves that are books in translation. First I was like, well maybe it's books from Japan because I think I started like a lot of people, and the YA author and a good friend of mine, Nova Ren Suma, recommended my first Murakami to me which was his novella *After Dark*, which is very

unsettling. Pretty much about a girl held in captivity, escaping who's held her captive but it's also about like, you know, the city at night and the people who live in the city at night. It's just very unsettling magical realism. So after I read that, I was like well maybe I should try one of his full length novels and I tried *Norwegian Wood*, which I think is one of those titles that everybody who loves Murakami as read and enjoyed.

My natural instinct is to usually look for women authors because I feel like sometimes women authors of a country don't often get as much attention or claim as the men do. So then I ended up reading a lot of Japanese women in translation and enjoying that a lot. I eventually got to a point where two of my recent favorite books in translation are from South American women in translation.

So, I think part of it is just the magic of reading a translation that's really well done, where the writing is just strung together so beautifully and realizing this is someone paying tribute to someone else by translating their work. That this work meant so much to them that they are translating it and they're doing their best to keep the essence while also adding, you know, like some of their own turn of phrase to it. It's just kinda magical in a way, thinking about how two people can work together on something and how somebody else's story, but then because another person worked on it, something of them is in there as well. Some of their style as an author also ends up in that story.

So, the story you're reading is kinda like this transformed beast in a way that you are admiring but you're also realizing that it didn't always, you know like, look this way. It's been transformed in some way.

[00:31:40]

ANNE: Interesting. There's a reason that over the years I've so frequently put a book in translation as a category for the Modern Mrs. Darcy reading challenge. I'm always happy to see book lists and translated titles being featured because in the United States, where you and I both are, we don't read [LAUGHS] that many books in translation. I think something like 3% of our works are in translation which is way lower than other countries. So it is a little harder to find, but it's so worth doing for a different point of view, different kind of literature, windows to another world. And I'm glad to hear you seeking it out and singing its praises.

KARUNA: Yeah, it really means a lot to me for that reason, I guess, because I have a parent who comes from a different culture and I kinda straddle two cultures by essence of being biracial. So I think I can kinda appreciate these books where it's kinda like this beautiful and like you know, really well-crafted window into somebody else's culture, their expectations for life, what matters to them, what doesn't, what really is life changing for them, what isn't as serious to consider.

ANNE: Well we can work with that, Karuna. Now tell me about a book that wasn't for you.

[00:32:50]

KARUNA: I try to be really good about not hating on books, especially now that I've become an author. I'm trying to be more gracious about it and I say, oh-

ANNE: [LAUGHS] Nobody's asking you to hate on anything.

KARUNA: [LAUGHS] This book wasn't for me, but it could be for something else. But one book I really hated and I was forced to read in high school by my AP English teacher was *Catch-22*. [ANNE LAUGHS] I want to say it was Joseph Heller, right?

ANNE: So nobody's asking you to hate on anything, but you're happy to do it is what you're saying.

KARUNA: Yeah. Yeah. If it's - if it's a particular title. *Catch-22*. I only read it once and I don't want to read it every again. I know a lot of my professors have been very astonished and they're like, oh, you didn't like *Catch-22*? It's like - it's satire and you usually like satire. You like absurdist fiction. You read historical fiction. You've read war stories before. But all of those elements that I like in any other story, I just really could not get into that book. Maybe it was the point that I was being forced to read it and I hated it, but I've also read other books that I was forced to read and I ended up enjoying them.

But I just really disliked every character. I disliked the writing. Maybe it's because I was a teenager, but I had no connection to what was going on. I just really disliked it.

ANNE: Now we don't have enough data points here to draw sweeping conclusions, but all the other titles you've referenced have been earnest in comparison to *Catch-22*.

KARUNA: Well I think that was the thing. I enjoy clever writing, but I don't enjoy it when you can feel the sense of smugness coming from the book. Like I'm clever, right? Praise me. I'm clever. I think *Catch-22* just really gave me that sense.

For instance, *Mr Fox* is very, very clever, but you can feel the author, you know, stepping back and she wants you to draw your own conclusions and your own connections to it while you enjoy why it is clever to you. Where *Catch-22* is kinda is, I'm sorry to say, but beating you over the head that this is satire. Like you know, you should be laughing. You should be questioning human existence and I've just never been into that.

ANNE: At dinner last night, my daughter was saying that she's thinking about picking this up. She needs to pick a book for her next unit at school and the way they do it, you can choose from a short list of titles and *Catch-22* is one of them. And I remember feeling just barely old enough to read this in high school, and she's not there yet, and I'm curious to see what transpires. I may not let her listen to this episode. [LAUGHS]

[00:35:18]

KARUNA: I'd be interested to hear what happens, too. I don't think I mentioned this, but last year, I was a middle school and early high school English teacher. So, I came into a class, my home room class was seventh grade, and I loved them dearly. I still call them my kids even though I no longer teach them. But they were very jaded because, I still don't understand this, their teacher the year before I came, had given them *To Kill A Mockingbird*, 10 to 11 year olds. They were utterly horrified by some of the content. [LAUGHS] So every time I said, well, we're going to read a book that's a classic, they were just like, is it going to be *To Kill A Mockingbird* again because we do not want to do that.

ANNE: Oh, no.

KARUNA: I felt like I had to do so much reworking of their sense of books that deal with issues that they need to know about. They need to be able to discuss and talk about. It was just so raw for them that I know when they get into high school, they'll probably appreciate it, but as middle schoolers, they just weren't ready for it yet.

I know one teacher was like "you're coddling them," and I really think I wasn't because I was saying that you should read whatever you want, but if it's something that you know you're going to have a very emotional reaction to and you're, you know, like you're upset by it or it's something that bothers you in some way, you should have, you know, like a way where you can either step back until you're ready to go back to it or you know who on staff you can come and talk to about it until you can, you know, keep going with it.

ANNE: It seems to me, if a book is a good, if a book is a classic, I don't know if there's anything to be gained from reading it at a younger age. Like, I'm a big Jane Austen fan and every year my kids ask me, hey, you probably want me to read Jane Austen, huh? I might be getting old enough. [LAUGHS] And I say, no. If I got to choose, I would say wait because the longer you wait, the more you'll appreciate it.

Now there's a tipping point. I don't think you need to wait until you're 47, but you don't need to be reading that at age 11. Maybe the rare kid, but as a blanket statement, I don't think that does anybody any favors.

KARUNA: Yes, I agree because like everybody has their different comfort levels. I know I was a kid who astonished some of my friends because at fourth grade, I read the entire unabridged *Little Women*. Carrying around this heavy antique edition that my grandma gave me. I also understand what you said, especially about Jane Austen because my personal Austen story is that I read *Pride & Prejudice* after watching several movie renditions and loving all of them. I must have been like maybe 13 or 14 at the time, and it just wasn't the right time for me. There was certain books that I went back to years later, reached out to me emotionally, and it was like, yes, this was the right time.

For me, that Austen book is *Persuasion*. I was watching a movie adaptation the other day and it just really, you know, it like really hit me hard in a way that when I first read it I was kinda just like, okay. You know like, how ... why does this matter? You know like, I'm sure somebody's going to be going, oh my God, this girl, like you know, this heathenest ... It just didn't connect with me at that time. The time I needed to connect with it and understand part of the emotion and the complications of the story and the family relationships, for instance, that time for me is now.

While on the other hand, I read books earlier than that, like *Jane Eyre*, and I really emotionally connected with them and I read it again in undergrad and I emotionally connected with it again for different reasons and I could kinda see different layers to it. If that makes sense.

[00:38:46]

ANNE: It does make sense. Karuna, what are you reading right now?

KARUNA: I'm jumping back and forth between a lot. I was just going to turn back to *The Trespasser* by Tana French, which is one of her Dublin Murder Squad books.

ANNE: Mm-hmm.

KARUNA: I love her books. I read *In The Woods* when I was an undergrad. One of my good friends who was also in the English department recommended it to me and she gave me her own big, heavy copy to carry around in my backpack along with all my other books and that was one of the few books I read for pleasure. Especially I think it was like the semester before I graduated so there was a lot going on.

But I remember sitting on the ground floor of my school's library and reading it and feeling chilled to the bone and like I was alone in the forest even though I was surrounded by people. And I love books that make me feel that way. The other book that made me feel that way was *The Haunting of Hill House* by Shirley Jackson, and I read that when I was younger, but didn't appreciate it and then I read it again when I was actually about to do my demo lesson as a teacher and I was waiting for them to call me in. I was surrounded by people. I was at the school I was working at, and you know, like people were running by, giving me stuff to sign, and I felt like I was alone and not surrounded by anybody. That was how intense the atmosphere was.

So I've always loved Tana French's writing. I love how she's able to like, you know, evoke so much fear and nervousness and suspense. *The Trespasser* is my second book I'm reading by her and it's the first one I'm reading with a female narrator, and she's biracial. Her issue with her identity is not as major as the murder mystery she's trying to solve, but it's still there and it's being handled so far in a really sympathetic and very well done way that makes me feel that Tana French was speaking to or has friends who are biracial who was talking to her about the experience and how it feels.

[00:40:33]

ANNE: Is there anything you'd like to be different in your reading life?

KARUNA: I would love to be more organized with my reading offline. Right now, I keep a spreadsheet. But I've been trying to disengage, I think as many of us are, from technology, from constantly being plugged in. So I would love to get past my perfectionist self and keep an analog journal of what I'm reading. I've tried two years in a row to sorta make a book bullet journal, but then I get so caught up in how pretty it has to look that I kinda end up not doing it. So this coming year, I think I'm just going to get a nice notebook and just - maybe just number one, two, three, use a star system or just like, you know, put a star next to a book I really find unforgettable and just keep it that way.

ANNE: Listeners, if you have any tips for Karuna, please visit us at whatshouldireadnextpodcast.com and share them in the show notes. Karuna, can I tell you what I do for my analog reading journal?

KARUNA: Oh, sure.

ANNE: It is ... I almost called it the dumbest, where I'm always telling my children [LAUGHS] talk nicely even to yourself. [KARUNA LAUGHS] But it is the simplest. It's actually in my regular journal, it's bullet-ish journal style. I always have my journal with me 'cause I have my to-do list in it and I found that if I make too big of a deal out of it, I definitely have an inner perfectionist that I need to keep in submission or nobody is happy.

I think it was therapeutic the first couple of times I screwed something up and put pay Verizon bill on my reading log [KARUNA LAUGHS], scratch it out, and then it's already messed up, so it's fine. It's no harm if I do it again. It's just a list of what I read, the dates I read it if I remember. I am keeping track of the format this year and my page count, but if I get behind on that because I don't have the book in my hand when I write in the journal, I try not to stress about it and I put a star off to the side if I really loved it.

What I found was the more complex and pretty I made my system, the less able I was to maintain it. So, this is my minimum, buyable product for the reading journal. And I don't know if that's going to be right for you, but that's my perfectionist road and how I've come to handle it.

KARUNA: That sounds like a very simple but very efficient way of handling it. So, I might have to try that and just remind myself it doesn't have to be perfect or sacred. It must as reading feels as sacred and beautiful to me, it doesn't you know, have to be so sacred that you don't get it done.

ANNE: You're still a reader even if you have a barebones reading journal.

KARUNA: That's very true.

[00:42:59]

ANNE: Okay.

ANNE: Readers, I love kale salad, and radishes, and even brussel sprouts, good-for-you foods, that I eat regularly. But even if I was going broke buying fresh veggies I'm still most likely not getting all the essential nutrients I need on a daily basis.

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ANNE: Can we talk about what you might enjoy reading next? 'Cause I have some ideas and I'd love to hear your take on them.

KARUNA: Oh, yes.

ANNE: Okay. So, Karuna, you loved *Mr Fox*, *Bel Canto*, and *Strange Weather in Tokyo*. I think it's fair to call them all carefully written, really evocative works. We know that you are an equal opportunity reader who's willing to try a lot of stuff. You're a professional author who writes in

the middle grade space -- I'm keeping that in mind. You've mentioned several times an interest in fiction that portrays biracial characters. You're all over the place, but what I'm really seeing is creative, imaginative, and interesting stories.

[00:45:20]

KARUNA: That sounds accurate.

ANNE: All right. We're going to go in a couple of directions here. Genre wise that is. What do you know about *Every Heart A Doorway* by Seanan McGuire?

KARUNA: I actually have a good friend and she loves that book, but I have never read it. I've read other books by the author, but not that one.

ANNE: The title that you enjoy that I think it most strongly resembles is *Mr Fox* because it's very high concept. It's imaginative. It is weird I hope in a way that you will find really fascinating and wonderful. Her story is set at Eleanor West's School for Wayward Children. This is a little bit like *Alice in Wonderland* in that children at Eleanor West's school have this strange inclination to accidentally tumble into other worlds. But once you visit another world, you are never the same thereafter. And the direction that McGuire takes this story is a little dark, a little twisty, definitely unexpected. [LAUGHS] There's stories within stories in the way that you enjoyed with *Mr Fox*, but I would definitely not call it like the same as or read alike, but it is reminiscent of that really interesting concept.

It's a little bit fantasy. A little bit mystery. Definitely a little bit fairytale, but this is a Grimm brother, dark and creepy variety fairytale, not anything too light and sunshine-y. The characters are really interesting here. They carry the story. One of my favorite quotes from the book is that real is a four letter word. And it's also slim. It's less than 200 pages, so you could read this quickly. How does that reading experience sound to you?

KARUNA: Oh, that's - that's always a good thing, especially if I have a lot on my plate. Sometimes you really need a slim book that can linger with you, you know, like you don't have time to read a full length book.

ANNE: Sometimes what a reader needs is a little momentum to get them going again. And a book that comes in at 170-something pages can do that.

KARUNA: Definitely.

ANNE: Well as a middle grade author, how do you feel about a middle grade title? Is that okay?

KARUNA: Yeah.

[00:47:25]

ANNE: It's not fantasy. I don't feel like it's exactly in your lane. What do you know about *The Science of Breakable Things* by Tae Keller?

KARUNA: Tae is actually a friend of mine and I've actually been reading that one. [LAUGHS]

ANNE: Oh, have you really?

KARUNA: I love her writing. Middle grade is going to be a little bit harder because probably a title you'll pull up is going to be a friend's book that I have either [ANNE LAUGHS] reading, have read, or am planning to read soon.

ANNE: So for readers who might be interested, *The Science of Breakable Things* is about a 12-year-old girl named Natalie who's science teacher is obsessed with the scientific method, which is good for learning, but also kinda annoying. So - so that's the backdrop against which the plot launches forward. This is a book about a 12-year-old girl whose mom is several depressed and as a seventh grader, she doesn't know how to deal with this. And learning to cope in a really sweet, uplifting, creative way involving an egg-drop competition. [ANNE LAUGHS] Which sounds kinda silly, but it works.

KARUNA: It works so beautifully too from what I've read so far. It really does.

ANNE: What do you know about *Ayesha At Last* by Uzma Jalaluddin?

KARUNA: It's one that I've really been looking forward to reading, but I haven't read yet. When I hear Austen illusions of any sort, I'm like, oh my gosh, yes.

ANNE: [LAUGHS] Well we have that in common. Anything that is Austen-adjacent, even if I suspect it might be less than riveting, moves higher on my to-be-read list than titles that are not Austen-adjacent. So this is really fun. It's a *Pride & Prejudice* retelling. It comes out in June. I just said retelling but something that I do like about it is that it's not a straight interpretation. Every Austen character does not have their 21st century equal exactly, but it's close enough that you still get to do that fun thing, like oh, who's Wickham? What he's going to look like?

KARUNA: Yeah.

ANNE: What's going to be the equivalent to Lydia's bad marriage and how are Lizzy and Darcy not going to hit it off in the beginning? What's going to go wrong?

This novel draws serious inspiration from *Pride & Prejudice*, but it is set in the Muslim community of 21st century suburban Toronto. 21st century Darcy is a devout Muslim. He's always at the mosque. He wears the long beard. He has the loose fitting white robe. 21st century Elizabeth is Ayesha. *Ayesha At Last* from the title. She's a poet. She's a substitute

teacher. It's not going particularly well. She's not exactly following her dream, but she's doing the best she can. She's 27, so in that community, she is over the hill, past the age where she should be married.

When the two meet, it is disastrous. He judges her. She judges him. She calls him a fundie because of the long robes and the long beard and he thinks that she is a revert and definitely not good enough Muslim for him because she's holding a cocktail and a cigarette. And the cigarette's not hers and there's no alcohol in that drink, but it doesn't matter because he sees her and it's like um, we are never going to be friends. It never occurs to him that they might be more.

Of course, they're bound to come together in a really creative way and they're going to have friends and co-workers and siblings who do terrible things that bring them together. It's a little bit predictable because this is *Pride & Prejudice*, you know how the story ends, but seeing how Jalaluddin makes it happen, how it comes about, is just ... You know what you were talking about baking, tea, and books? How they just can't be bad. They're cozy. They're fun. They're just like ahhh. That's how I suspect you'll feel about *Ayesha At Last*.

[00:51:00]

KARUNA: That sounds utterly magical and exactly what I need because like Ayesha, I - I want to say I'm not an old maid yet, but [ANNE LAUGHS] you know as you proceed in your 20s, especially in my extended family on the Bangladeshi side has started, you know, freaking out as no single man appears. And my cousin who is technically ahead of me and should be the one who everybody is concerned about has said that she passes to me, I'm not even sure that's something that you can do with marriage, but everybody starts bothering me when they see me in the vicinity. Definitely sounds like something I'll relate to, especially as a former teacher and an author who's not always sure if she's following her dreams the right way while also trying to be happy single while everybody's telling you that no, you shouldn't be so comfortable being single. You should be worried. You should be finding someone. You should be meeting someone.

ANNE: Well I thought I had quite a few good reasons why you might enjoy *Ayesha At Last* and you just added like seven more. Okay. I have a novel in translation top of mind that happens to be sitting on my desk right here and I wonder if that's not a sign. The book is the *Time In Between* by Maria Duenas. It's a Spanish novelist. This is her debut. It came out in 2005. It was a runaway bestseller in her native Spain, and I hope it's done at least modestly well in America.

She's continuing to publish, but *The Time In Between* is my favorite of hers. It's set during the Spanish civil war. it's speculated that one of the reasons it's done so well in Spain is not only is she a Spanish writer, but also she's writing about the Spanish civil war, which is still so much fresher in that country's history than it ever ... I mean, did you cover the Spanish civil war in your middle school, high school, or college history classes? I did not where I was.

[00:52:45]

KARUNA: I don't remember covering it either.

ANNE: This is the story of Sira Quiroga. She is one of the most distinguished seamstresses in Madrid. One of my novelist friends once commented that everything meaningful in a novel is set up and pay off. Duenas spends the first hundred pages of this novel setting up the story of Sira. She's poor, but she works among the wealthy. There's nothing special to recommend her except she's exceptionally talented with the needle. She has almost no family. She's making it, barely. But then as the political situation erodes and things get tenser, all her clients leave. There's no one to sew for anymore.

So Duenas sets up the story in such a way that she launches this poor seamstress in Madrid into a life of espionage in Tetouan, Morocco. So it's 600 pages. I have to tell you, the first time I read this seven, eight years ago, I remember thinking the dialogue was a little clunky in places, but I just reread this a week ago and I was like [LAUGHS] what was wrong with my younger self as a reader? 'Cause this thing is good.

It starts fast, it sucks you right in, and my only fear is can she keep up the pace for this long once we get settled in Morocco? And I think the answer is definitely yes. You said that you're a sucker for beautiful language.

KARUNA: Yes.

ANNE: I don't know what the original Spanish is like because mine is limited to where's the bathroom, but I can only imagine what this must have been like in Spanish because the translator, Daniel Hahn, did an amazing job with the translation. There is so many interesting turns of phrases and pity lines and things that if you maintained a reading journal that was more detailed, you'd be wanting to scramble down the quotes.

The opening line is a typewriter shattered my destiny. I find that intriguing. Do you find that intriguing?

KARUNA: That really is a really gripping first line.

ANNE: So you've got some interesting family dynamics, you've got love and loss in war time, the world of couturier and international espionage. And honestly, I know that sounds like a lot to cover, but it works. And 600 pages does not feel too long, but it does give the story room to spread out in a really riveting way. How does that sound?

KARUNA: Honestly, like I've used this word too much today, but magical.

ANNE: Magical!

[00:55:10]

KARUNA: And it's all places I personally want to visit one day. Like one of my dream destinations to visit is Spain and another is Morocco.

ANNE: I am right there with you. I would love to go. And I don't know when you're going to get to go in your actual person, but you can go on the page pretty darn quick.

KARUNA: That's the beautiful thing about reading.

ANNE: Yes, it is. All right, Karuna. So of the three books we talked about today, *Every Heart A Doorway*, *Ayesha At Last*, and *The Time In Between*, which title do you think you'll read next?

KARUNA: Likely *The Time In Between* just because the U.S. edition of *Ayesha At Last* isn't coming out like yo usaid until June. So while I'm waiting, I might as well, you know, start with the one that's out.

ANNE: You have to decide somehow and that's a good way to cut through the angst and get reading.

KARUNA: Yeah, and - and *Every Heart A Doorway* is out, too, but right now, I'm in the mood to read something full length so I'll save that for when I need something shorter.

ANNE: Oh, because that will be coming. You have a book coming out this fall.

KARUNA: Yes.

ANNE: Karuna, thank you so much for talking books with me today.

KARUNA: Oh, it was such a pleasure. Thank you so much.

[CHEERFUL OUTRO MUSIC]

ANNE: Hey readers, I hope you enjoyed my discussion with Karuna, and I'd love to hear what YOU think she should read next. That page is at whatshouldireadnextpodcast.com/183 and it's where you'll find the full list of titles we talked about today.

You can find out more about Karuna's book *The Gauntlet* and any upcoming releases at karunariazi.com, and follow her on Twitter @KarunaRiazi. That's Karuna, K-A-R-U-N-A, Riazi, R-I-A-Z-I. karunariazi.com.

Next week's guest Will Schwalbe is coming on to chat with me about the role of serendipity and curiosity in his reading life. Here's a sneak peek:

[00:57:00]

WILL: As a kid, I saw the movie Cabaret and I kinda fell a little bit in love with Michael York as many of us did. [LAUGHS] Um, I decided to investigate the era. So I read a ton of Christopher Isherwood books. Everything I could lay my hands on, which led me to read more and more about the 1930s, and then I discovered the biggest bestselling author of the 1930s was Lin Yutang. So, I had to read Lin Yutang and see what that was all about and that's when I discovered *The Importance of Living*.

So again, it's one of those things that I love serendipity how a movie and an actor leads to the source material, leads you to other books of the time, and leads you to the book that'll be the most important book of your life or one of them.

[CHEERFUL OUTRO MUSIC]

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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.