



WSIRN Episode 187: Traveling the world without leaving your hometown
Hosted by Anne Bogel, with guest Hannah Christmas

[00:00:00]

HANNAH: I do kinda get into like a post-book depression. [BOTH LAUGH] After the really heavy ones. [LAUGHS]

[CHEERFUL INTRO MUSIC]

ANNE: Hey, readers. I'm Anne Bogel, and this is What Should I Read Next? Episode 187. 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 Hannah Christmas is a stay-at-home mom whose reading life changed forever when she had a baby. Not only how much she read or when she read, but the big picture, long-term plan way she wanted to share her love of reading with the world. Today we're chatting about fresh blood in the bookselling world, the treatment for a serious overdose of books set in New York City, literary handcrafts, and much, much more. Let's get to it.

Hannah, welcome to the show.

HANNAH: Thanks, I'm so excited to be here.

ANNE: So we got your submission from our form at [Whatshouldireadnextpodcast.com/guest](https://www.whatshouldireadnextpodcast.com/guest) and I was excited to see that you live in Kansas City because I was just there for the first time.

HANNAH: Yeah, I saw that.

[00:01:15]

ANNE: Which was a delight. [HANNAH LAUGHS] I instagrammed a few beautiful bookish sites in Kansas City, including your amazing library wall with the 30-foot tall books painted on the side of the parking garage at the central location at the library. What brought you to Kansas City?

HANNAH: Well I've grown up here, all my life. Grew up in a suburb just outside and then stayed. I went to college in the city and met my husband. We're still here and we love it. We can't imagine leaving.

ANNE: I hear that you dream of being a professional reader [HANNAH LAUGHS] or a librarian or working in books somehow.

HANNAH: Somehow.

ANNE: What do you actually do?

HANNAH: I am a stay-at-home mom with a two-year-old daughter. I went to college for accounting for the hopes of having a job at the end of it, and then I got pregnant, so that didn't really work out in the end. [LAUGHS]

ANNE: Hannah, that sounds a lot like my own story.

HANNAH: Okay.

ANNE: Really resonating with the life path you are describing here. [HANNAH LAUGHS] I don't know what everyone's experiences like with a young child as a new-ish mother, but mine involved a lot of picture books. Is it fair to say that you really are working in books somehow these days?

HANNAH: So many picture books. [LAUGHS] We have this great babylit books which are a lot of the classics, like *Jane Eyre* and *Anne of Green Gables*. They're just picture books of course, but I love going through those and seeing how excited she gets when when we read them and Dr. Seuss is a big thing right now and all sorts of things. [LAUGHS]

ANNE: Tell me more about your professional, bookish aspirations. What does the dream look like?

HANNAH: The dream is big. I would love to open some sort of bookshop or even like a book truck. I keep seeing those on the Internet and I just get so excited about selling books, but of course, I have no idea how to do that, how to get started on that. And so [LAUGHS] it is a very big dream, but if it could be smaller, I would love to work in a library or just, you know, a bookstore that's already established. [LAUGHS]

[00:03:10]

ANNE: So it's something that interests you, but you don't know how to get there.

HANNAH: Yeah. Starting a business is really scary. My dad actually runs his own business and has always discouraged the idea [LAUGHS] growing up just because it is a lot of work and scary to jump into something like that. But you know, living in Kansas City, there is a definitely a need for it and I see that, and it makes me sad. So, I constantly dream of it.

[BOTH LAUGH]

ANNE: Okay, tell me again what the business would look like.

HANNAH: Oh, it would probably just be like a children's bookstore 'cause you know, right at the moment, reading books to my daughter, it's definitely a passion of mine. Now is looking at children's books. And I've actually been reading a lot more like middle grade books lately because I guess I kind of skipped that growing up. I don't remember reading a lot of middle grade. I remember reading like really young books and then classics, and you know, books that were beyond my age. I would love to dive into that more, you know, very, you got mail kinda idea.

ANNE: I'm sure that starting a business is intimidating. First of all, can I start by saying really good advice I was given when I was 25?

HANNAH: Yes.

ANNE: When I said to a trusted person in my life, I'm so frustrated that my career is not where I wanted it to be and he very kindly said something like, honey, you got time. [HANNAH LAUGHS] Which I really appreciated.

HANNAH: I need to hear that every now and then. [LAUGHS]

ANNE: Well, I mean, it's true. We do because we can be very happy with where our lives are and simultaneously think, ah, professionally, this isn't what I wanted yet, and so it didn't really make me feel a lot better at the time, but it made me feel a little better. And when I look back, [LAUGHS] that was really good advice. [HANNAH LAUGHS] And that wasn't the only conversation we had about it. I think I needed reassurance. You really do have time to figure things out.

HANNAH: Yeah. I think that's hard to remember because you know, when you're a kid and you have these dreams, you just think as soon as you graduate high school, you're just going to go

out and do it. It's going to be over. And nobody tells you about the long process and how long that feels when you're doing it in the midst of it.

[00:05:16]

ANNE: Right. You graduate from college. You're 22 and thus begins the rest of your life, right?

HANNAH: [LAUGHS] Yup.

ANNE: The people who have that figured out right away and start on the path they end up on are called fast starters and good for them.

HANNAH: [LAUGHS] Yeah.

ANNE: But I don't know what that feels like. It's been really exciting for me to see as an author and an all-around, weird jack-of-all-trade/jill-of-all-trades book person, the groundswell of independent bookstores and businesses happening these days, and it's so ... It almost looks to me from the outside, this is not confirmed by people who are actually industry booksellers ... [HANNAH LAUGHS] experts.

This is my take as someone who is just looking around the world, is it seems like there's a real changing of the guard going on. And I'm seeing younger people, especially younger women, maybe these are just the booksellers I know in their 20s and 30s, taking over old shops from people who are retiring or starting new ones and they look different. And they're entering with passion and enthusiasm and sometimes a good bit of business know-how, sometimes they are pretty much making it up as they go. [HANNAH LAUGHS]

But they're creating all these amazing bookish businesses and it has been such a delight to get to know them, to find out more about these places, to get to visit some of them in person and to see how these women are thriving in their work and their communities are as a result of it. So that's been amazing.

HANNAH: Yeah.

ANNE: Finally, when I was in Kansas City, we went to two bookstores, well I guess three if you count the Barnes and Noble at Country Club Plaza.

HANNAH: [LAUGHS] Yeah.

ANNE: We went to Rainy Day Books over in Fairway, Kansas, and then we went to a new ... I think they call themselves a boozy bookstore bar, they are in the river market neighborhood downtown. It's called Our Daily Nada.

HANNAH: Yes.

ANNE: That was fun to pop into. But they both said for a community this size, and a community that cares about books and reading, why don't we have more independent bookstores?

[00:07:04]

HANNAH: I don't know. It's so sad and you know, other cities I visit, have a ton of bookstores and that's always something I try to look for when I go to a new city. [ANNE LAUGHS] I don't know, maybe that's just me.

ANNE: Everyone's nodding at home right now. [BOTH LAUGH] Me, too. Me, too.

HANNAH: You know, I feel like they're so easy to find and they're just so many of them and they really hold like, especially the independent ones, they really hold the-the culture of the city. And it's really sad that we don't have as many because Kansas City culture is just so vibrant and palpable. When you come here, everyone is just so proud of the city. And so it just makes me sad that we don't have a cultural spot like that. We have a few, but not enough I think to carry the city.

ANNE: As book lovers, we-

HANNAH: We want more. [LAUGHS]

ANNE: We generally are never sad to have another indie bookstore in town. [LAUGHS] This is probably a good time to chime in with I get requests all the time in my email and social media from readers who are traveling who want to know if there is a good independent bookstore they can visit in the town they are going to. And sometimes I can say, oh yes, definitely, I've been there. Let me recommend this one. Or this one is on my bookish bucket list. But there is an excellent tool at indiebound I-N-D-I-E-

HANNAH: Yes.

ANNE: Bound.org. It's an independent bookstore finder. And when I travel, I ask the people in town for recommendations. Sometimes I ask on Instagram or Twitter, but I always check out that independent bookstore tool.

HANNAH: I have seen that before in searching for-for independent bookstores and that is a really helpful tool.

ANNE: Hannah, I don't want to freak your dad out, but I do want to affirm that you got time. And it's been really interesting to see the wide variety of stores and businesses that people are opening or taking over or converting. Some are starting on a shoestring. On very short notice. Just are determined to figure it out as they go and because of their town and their rent, and their

connections and their limitations, that works for them and they're not in danger of losing their shirts. [HANNAH LAUGHS]

But other people are raising half a million dollars and planning for years before they open their shop, so there is a wide variety of ways to do this. And you don't have to open a store to get involved in a store, but you got options. So I would encourage you to have fun exploring what bookish people are doing these days and see how that resonates with you.

[00:09:20]

HANNAH: That is encouraging. Yeah. I guess I do have plenty of years ahead of me before I really run out of time, so. [LAUGHS]

ANNE: I do understand how everybody would rather be working in books today, but if it's not happening now, that doesn't mean it won't ever happen. And you still get to be a reader.

HANNAH: Yes.

ANNE: Tell me about your reading life these days.

HANNAH: You know, it's funny, before I had my daughter, I feel like I kinda fell off the reading wagon 'cause I was in college and it was just hard to read and study at the same time. But then I had her and I discovered how to read and hold her at the same time. [LAUGHS] It was just a lot of free time and I remember that year, I read so many books, but it was kinda chaotic, picking up suggestions here and there. But then I met Whitney Conard, who she was on your show.

ANNE: Ohh. I need to come back to Kansas City to meet her.

HANNAH: Yes.

ANNE: And you.

HANNAH: [LAUGHS] It's funny actually. Her husband and my husband work together. I heard about her unread shelf project and I realized that I have a lot of books that I have not read or even touched in years, but I would still love to read them, so lately I've been working on that and just reading what I've got. I'll still go to the library every now and then, but it is comforting to know that I have plenty of great books to choose from just on my own shelves.

ANNE: You've gotten to go shopping for your next read on your bookshelves like Will Schwalbe was just talking about.

HANNAH: Yes. Yeah, yeah. I really resonated with that statement shopping at your own home.

ANNE: Was past-Hannah good to future-Hannah with your book purchases?

HANNAH: I think so. It's ... You know, my book purchases are so, I don't know the right word for it. I don't have a plan [LAUGHS] when I go looking at books. I look at what's good, look at the covers, I recognize titles and I'll just pull it off the shelf and-and buy it. I still have a lot of books that I have inherited from my sister or even stolen from my sister [BOTH LAUGHS] in past years and I'm just holding onto them. I recently read one that I absolutely loved and that was just really ... It's really pleasant, you know, to read a book that you've had for years and for it to be one that you cherish. It's fun to explore that.

[00:11:38]

ANNE: Hannah, is that book going to come up in your favorites?

HANNAH: It'll come up in my currently reading 'cause I just- [LAUGHS]

ANNE: Okay.

HANNAH: I just finished it yesterday.

ANNE: 'Cause we just can't let that slide by.

HANNAH: No, no. [LAUGHS]

ANNE: You said something that made me think that you had recently begun tracking what you read and that that was a change for you.

HANNAH: Yes. Early this year, I was just kinda looking at this map that we have on our wall. I was thinking about how when people travel, they check off the places on a map. You know, I don't get to travel as often, but I do read a lot of books that take place in a lot of places. I thought well, why don't I just get a map and color in the places that I visit through my books?

The settings are all kinda concentrated it seems in, you know, America and mostly, in like New York or big cities. Or they take place in Europe and like England and well, really, it's just England it seems. [BOTH LAUGH] There's not-not a lot of like new places that I've been to through my books even. So I've been trying to find diversity in that, and that's when I started pulling off specific books off of my shelf. Really looking into where they take place. Pulled a bunch of books off the shelves and kinda made a stack of books that take place in various countries and I tried organizing them geographically even to kinda get a better picture of what I'm missing from my shelves. And that was really eye opening for me.

ANNE: You mentioned that you had a particularly strong eye roll for the excessive number of books set in New York City.

HANNAH: There are so many, and I've actually never been to New York City, so maybe if I went there I would understand a little more of, you know, the inspiration that people feel when they go there. But man, when I was organizing my books geographically, I realized there are dozens of books that I have that take place there that I want to read, but at the same time, do I want to read them all this year, especially when I'm tracking that? Already on my map that I have colored in, I have so many books just stacked up on top of each other [LAUGHS] in New York or in the surrounding area and it makes me wonder about all these other places, a lot of areas in the midwest, which of course that's special in my heart 'cause that's where I live. Even out west, the Pacific coast and I don't find a lot there, but New York. That is where writers live, I guess.

[BOTH LAUGH]

[00:14:09]

ANNE: Well you are not alone in thinking enough with the New York City books already.
[HANNAH LAUGHS] Although I have to admit, I do love a good New York novel especially if it has me Googling locations and looking at neighborhoods and trying to see what the park looked like where the big scene took place. But I can understand how if you want to vicariously travel through the page and you want to go a lot of places, then you want books to take you to some different places.

HANNAH: Yeah.

ANNE: Are there any good books set in Kansas City?

HANNAH: You know, I have not found very many. Gillian Flynn, she's written a couple like I think, but I only read *Gone Girl* which took place in the St. Louis area.

ANNE: It did?

HANNAH: Yeah, and I think I read *Sharp Objects*, but even that was I think also in the St. Louis area. So there's really not a lot in Kansas City.

ANNE: All right. Listeners, if you have any recommendations, go tell us in the show notes on this episode.

HANNAH: Yes, please. [LAUGHS]

ANNE: Good Kansas City books. I can't wait to hear more about the books that you do enjoy reading and we will try to take you around the world with today's book recommendations.

Readers, we just wrapped up the school year here and while it was busy with lots of end-of-year activities, at least we had a routine. By the time the kids got home from school, Will and I were thinking through what's for dinner and what time we needed to eat before or after activities.

Now that summer is here and it's staying light outside much later, I'm missing all my cues for transitioning to dinner time. Luckily with PrepDish, most of the work is already done.

Each week, I get a PrepDish email with my complete plan of healthy, whole food based meals. 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 fresh.

Come dinner time, most of the work is already done with PrepDish's shop once, prep once philosophy. I can get any given meal on the table in 20 to 30 minutes. Just print out your plan, do all of your shopping, and then in one go, you can do all your chopping, marinating, and other prepping for the meals at once. You'll save time on prep day by doing it all together. And then save time each night as you start dinner several steps ahead.

This week at my house, our PrepDish dinners include grilled chicken with pineapple salsa and grilled zucchini and zesty cod over kale with cauliflower steaks. For dessert, we're enjoying watermelon mojito popsicles.

Right now, you can take care of your meal planning for the whole summer with a premium PrepDish subscription. PrepDish offers 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 fatbombs, those high calorie snacks that keep your carb intake low.

Check out PrepDish.com/READNEXT for a free two-week trial. Again that's PrepDish.com/READNEXT.

ANNE: 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 then we'll talk about what you should read next. Let's start with your favorites. Tell me about a book you love.

[00:17:06]

HANNAH: *The Martian* by Andy Weir. When I was picking these books, it was kinda funny because I was ... Honestly, I didn't think I was going to be on this show. [BOTH LAUGH] So I was kinda, I was just looking at my bookshelf and like oh, yeah, I really loved that book and I loved that book, but this one was really special actually. I read it in college. I wanted to be an astronaut when I was a kid. That was one of my dreams, but then I saw Apollo 13 and then that

really freaked me out. [BOTH LAUGH] And so, I was just over with the being stranded in space and anything to do with space.

But the cover was really intriguing and I remember seeing a lot of people on Instagram talking about this book. I picked it up and didn't really read the back cover or anything about it other than there was an interview with the author at the end of the book, and I kinda flipped through that. I just really liked his voice and his humor and he has a love for Doctor Who that I can really resonate with.

[00:18:05]

ANNE: See, I've never seen an episode, so that just went right over my head when I read the book.

HANNAH: [LAUGHS] I thought it was very, very clever. Put a new spin on science fiction for me that I really enjoyed. So the premise of the book is a crew goes to Mars to, you know, do scientific exploration. Something goes wrong, and one of the crew members gets left behind. The one who gets left behind, Mark, is kinda the most unlikely person to survive by himself on a new planet 'cause he is a botanist and an engineer. It was kinda one of those funny like why are you an astronaut? What are you doing on Mars? But he was mostly there just to help with the equipment and then also to study potential life on Mars.

And when he gets left there by himself, he kinda has to become like, you know, MacGyver and find clever ways to survive. And the format of the book is really just interesting. It's his daily logs and it's just very scientific at first, but he's also really funny and sarcastic because he's alone on the planet, and what's the point of being professional when you're alone on the planet? [BOTH LAUGH]

It's very fun, but it's also really intense and suspenseful and keeps you guessing. Definitely an adventure story. I read it so fast, which is funny for me because I don't typically go towards science fiction or even science-y books. There was no romance, which was kinda nice for me. I don't always love romance in novels. I feel like sometimes they get in the way and in this book, it definitely would have gotten in the way 'cause how can you make sense of a romance with a guy that is alone on Mars, you know? [LAUGHS]

ANNE: You can't really romance those potatoes.

HANNAH: No, no, so it was just very focused on the matter at hand and I loved it.

ANNE: Okay. So it surprised you in all the right ways.

HANNAH: Yes.

ANNE: Excellent. Hannah, tell me about the second book you chose. Was it hard to choose?

HANNAH: It was very hard to choose. [ANNE LAUGHS] I chose one and then I emailed your producer Brenna to change it to this other one because I needed something that I had read more recently than the one I had initially chose, which was *The Time Traveler's Wife*. I read that back in high school. One that I did love recently was *We Were The Lucky Ones* by Georgia Hunter.

[00:20:26]

ANNE: Tell me more.

HANNAH: One of my best friends, Natalie, she texted me one day and sent a picture of this book and said, have you read this? And I was like no, I've never even heard of it. Obviously I put a hold on it at the library. I kinda forgot about it, but when I got it, it just grabbed me immediately. I feel like I read a lot of World War II era novels, you know, historical fiction or even like memoirs or anything like that, and this one was just absolutely the best one I've ever read.

I thought it was fiction at first for like several chapters in, but then I realized the author was actually writing about her own family and the stories were true and that completely shocked me because it seemed so impossible. I started reading the afterword halfway through it, reading the book, because I had-I had to know how she found out about these stories and her research process because I just couldn't believe it.

ANNE: This is Georgia Hunter's story of her own family's history. She had four family members, all siblings, by nothing short of a miracle, her entire family made it out of Nazi-occupied Europe to safety at various parts around the world. The odds of one family having so many family members make it to safety instead of ending up in a concentration camp were unbelievably-

HANNAH: The odds were extremely low.

ANNE: Extremely low. It's interesting. We actually had Georgia Hunter on the podcast back in October of 2018. That is episode 157, the stories behind the stories we love to read. And shortly thereafter, I got to meet Georgia. She spoke at the historical society here in town and I don't believe I'm conflating, but I'm a little afraid [BOTH LAUGH] that I'm about to tell you something she talked about at the historical society and not on the podcast. But she talked about how this is fiction, but the story itself is true, and she said--I thought this was so interesting--that the reason she changed and decided to write it as a novel is she wanted her characters to be able to speak about what they were feeling. So that the reader, through the character's eyes, could see what it was like to be, for example, stealing a ... Oh, it's either a Nazi uniform, a nurse uniform, something.

HANNAH: Yeah.

ANNE: But she tells the story about how one of her relatives donnes this clothing for the purposes of hiding and boldly walks out the gates of the city with a bunch of rifled officers watching her. And she said that she knew this happened, but she couldn't have her character tell you precisely what she did or what she saw when she looked around or what was going on in her mind, in her heart unless she made it a novel, and I thought that was so, so interesting.

[00:23:05]

HANNAH: Yes, and I think that's what I loved most about it because you read a lot of historical accounts of true stories and it-it just reads very much like a documentary, which are great, but you don't really get to know the characters and you don't really feel for them or sympathize with them. That's really what I loved. You really felt like you knew them and you were really cheering them on. It wasn't like you were watching from afar.

And I remember just reading throughout this book and just feeling like this heavy weight on me of how much I wanted this family to reunite and I just remember thinking it reminded me so much of *Game of Thrones* in like the Starks all being separated throughout the entire show and how much I wanted the family to get together. And I just kept thinking, oh, once they find each other, everything will be great again, and everything will be fixed, and of course, that's not true all the time. But you know, throughout this book, I'm just thinking oh, they need to find each other. They don't even know they're alive. It was just really sad for me to read that, but it also really kept me reading and kept me engaged and that's what I need in a novel.

ANNE: Okay, that's really interesting that you said that it reads like a documentary because what I've noticed so far with *The Martian* and *We Were The Lucky Ones*, two very disparate books. I mean, these are on polar opposite ends of the bookstore, but they're both very, very detailed in their descriptions and they can make you feel because you can see everything in your mind, they make you feel like you are right there.

HANNAH: Yes.

ANNE: Okay. So *We Were The Lucky Ones* had four different narrators. Some readers found that a little confusing, but you like that.

HANNAH: I like that a lot. [LAUGHS]

ANNE: Okay. Okay. What did you choose for your final favorite?

HANNAH: My final favorite was *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte and probably the first classic that I read by myself out of my own volition and absolutely loved it. I'm a big fan of classics and you know, Jane Austen and Edith Wharton and L.M. Montgomery and you know, I read *Anna Karenina* last year and I loved that, but it's the writing style that I really like. I love the blend of poetry and also practicality. Like there's a weird mix of those two. It-it didn't really bog me down

with a bunch of details, but there was also like an eloquence of speech that is very specific to that time period. It made me just re-read sentences over and over again, not because I didn't catch something but just because I loved the way it sounded.

I also just loved the story itself. I loved those kinds of characters that are just loveable because of their person and who they are, not necessarily that they have everything together, they have everything going for them. She's not arrogant at all. She was compassionate and I don't know, she was just someone I feel like I resonated with especially when I read it back in middle school or high school. It really spoke to me.

[00:26:12]

ANNE: I love that you love classics. And it's funny that you chose *Jane Eyre* the way that you're describing your reading experience because after I graduated from college and spent a little bit of time reading all the new books, I finally realized oh, if I can read whatever I want to now, I can start reading the classics I was never assigned in high school and college and *Jane Eyre* was one of the first ones I read.

HANNAH: Yeah, there's something about that one that it's just very welcoming for people who maybe have not read many classics books and isn't a hard one to read either. The language doesn't really slow you down. I feel like it's very easy to read. So it was a very good first classic book to read for me.

ANNE: Okay, and you liked the eloquence of speech. It's also very atmospheric.

HANNAH: Yeah. I don't remember much about the specifics of the setting, but I do just remember falling in love with that era and that type of place 'cause I remember after reading it, feeling I needed to read more books like it, like Jane Austen because of the atmosphere.

ANNE: Hannah, did you have a hard time choosing a book that wasn't for you?

HANNAH: No. [LAUGHS] I-

ANNE: What did you choose?

HANNAH: I chose *One Thousand White Women: The Journals of May Dodd* by Jim Fergus and man, I really hated this book and I'm not afraid to say it. [LAUGHS]

ANNE: Tell me more.

HANNAH: I just feel like it was one of the worst books I've read, and of course, this is just for me. It takes place in 1875. Cheyenne Indian chief demands the U.S. government for one thousand white women to be sold to them for wives and this actually happened. And the book is asking the question well what if the U.S. government agreed?

I didn't feel like that idea was really carried out because you know, partway through the book, the government is saying, nope, I'm just kidding. We're not going to send all these women. So history didn't really change. That bothered me a lot because it felt like the author cheated and like we're not changing history with this book. [LAUGHS] You know?

ANNE: Mm-hmm.

[00:28:21]

HANNAH: It bothered me that it was written by a man, but it took place from the perspective of a woman and there were a lot of things that happened in the book. It-it didn't feel as realistic to me coming from, reading it as a woman and then it-it just seemed like there was a story that didn't get told.

ANNE: So, Hannah, it sounds like this didn't work for you because it promised you realism, fictional realism, but it promised you realism and you feel like it didn't deliver.

HANNAH: Yes.

ANNE: Okay. So if a book is going to set it up self to be realistic, it needs to feel realistic.

HANNAH: Yeah, and it felt more forced for the sake of ... I feel like, you know, there were a lot of characters in there that were ... I-I didn't have any sympathy for them because they all kinda acted as one personality, you know? They all acted very in control of their circumstances and very arrogant and to me, characters in those kind of positions were, or a person in that kind of position of being sold into marriage, you wouldn't feel very in control.

ANNE: Hannah, what are you reading right now?

HANNAH: Well I finished yesterday *The Interpreter of Maladies* by Jhumpa Lahiri. That was the book I was talking about earlier that I had stolen from my sister and read. It's a book of short stories kinda centered around immigrants from India. Different stories that immigrants could experience and I feel like it gave me a new appreciation for immigrant stories. And it was really special to me to read because both of my grandmothers are immigrants. So I feel like I kinda got to hear their story or experience their stories in different ways because they're all very different and I just love how it ended, very hopeful and I mean, the whole book just gave me all sorts of good feelings, and I absolutely loved it.

ANNE: Hannah, what would you like to be different in your reading life?

HANNAH: Well as I kinda shared earlier, I'd love to read just a variety of settings. To kind of narrow that down a little bit, I'd love to read books written by people from those places. I feel like that gives me a perspective that I need. You know, I feel like one of the reasons why people

read is to experience life through other people's eyes and to learn things that they didn't know before, and you know, even if it's fictional story, I feel like we can kinda get a glimpse of that. I always assume that little piece of the author is in there somewhere, and so, I'd like to have that perspective of the people that come from those places that I read about.

Another thing I would like: Just more inspiration for myself. And I feel like I'm creative in some ways, and so I'd like to feel more inspired in that regard, too.

ANNE: Readers, I just read an article that says dog owners are more active than people without dogs. And while I walk Daisy regularly and try to get my steps in every day, that's not the same as having an exercise routine to keep you fit and healthy. For that, try OpenFit. The brand new, simple streaming service that allows you to work out from the comfort of your living room in as little as 10 minutes a day.

Let the workouts come to you and skip the commute to the gym. Not only does OpenFit give you complete flexibility to watch at home from any device at any time that suits you, but they give you completely flexible programming as well.

They know that everyone's bodies are different, and so are their fitness goals, which is why they personalize to your needs with custom tailored, original content.

I always hate looking at a gym schedule and seeing I could actually get to that class if it was just 30 minutes later or 15 minutes earlier. With OpenFit, that's no longer an issue. Now I can load a barre or yoga video whenever I want.

Use the code READ and start using OpenFit for your journey to a healthier life. Right now during the Openfit 30-day challenge, my listeners get a special extended 30-day free trial membership to Openfit, when you text READ to 303030.

You will get full access to Openfit – all the workouts and nutrition information--- TOTALLY FREE. Again - Just text READ to 303030. Standard message and data rates may apply.

Readers, I love kale salad with dried cranberries and pecans and for less effort, out of the microwave, frozen brussel sprouts with butter and salt and pepper. I regularly eat good for you food like these, but I'm still most likely not getting all the essential nutrients women need on a daily basis. That's why there's Ritual, the obsessively-researched vitamin for women.

With Ritual, I can fill the gaps in my diet without filling up my medicine cabinet. Just two easy-to-take capsules provide nine nutrients all in their purest, cleanest forms. Their no-nausea

capsule design is gentle on an empty stomach, and there's a mint tap in every bottle to keep things fresh, so you don't get that fishy aftertaste common with most Omega-3s, both of which I appreciate since I take my vitamin first thing in the morning before coffee and before breakfast.

If you need help forming your routine, I recommend the pretty and practical habit tracker Ritual includes with your shipment. It helped me when I got serious about morning vitamins.

It's easy for you to start a subscription and it's easy to snooze it if you need to. It's only a \$1 a day to have all the essential nutrients your body needs delivered every month, no strings attached.

Better health doesn't happen overnight, and right now Ritual is offering What Should I Read Next listeners 10% off during your first three months! Fill in the gaps in your diet with Essential for Women--a small step that helps support a healthy foundation for your body.

Visit ritual.com/READNEXT to start your ritual today. That's 10% off during your first three months at ritual.com/READNEXT.

ANNE: Okay, so let's take a look at your books. You loved *The Martian* by Andy Weir, *We Were The Lucky Ones* by Georgia Hunter, and *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Bronte. Books that on the surface look very, very different but they do have definite common threads. They all very atmospheric, dependent on place. They have very, very detailed descriptions. They're all emotional in very different ways. At least, I don't know, could you call *The Martian* bittersweet? You could definitely call Georgia Hunter's and Bronte's bittersweet.

[00:34:39]

HANNAH: I think so.

ANNE: And I'm definitely noticing that you use the word hopeful and good feelings more than once.

HANNAH: And it doesn't have to have a happy ending. I don't want you to think that because I feel like I read a lot of sad books too that don't always end the way you want it to, but I like a feeling of hope or like a glimpse of hope, even in those sad endings when things don't work out and people die and whatever. Like I need that bit of it's going to be okay.

ANNE: Well let's talk about that atmosphere in detail for a second. I've seen your literary embroideries on Instagram.

HANNAH: Yes.

ANNE: Wow. [HANNAH LAUGHS] Those are incredible. I remember once seeing specifically from *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe* where they're walking into the forest, and it's ... I didn't know you could do that with needle and thread. What inspired you to start doing that?

HANNAH: I started embroidery last year. It was kinda like a New Years resolution. I just wanted to learn something new and I love crafts, but I wanted something that was cheap. [BOTH LAUGH] Knitting and crocheting, the yarn just costs too much money for me to do it all the time. So I started embroidery because I kinda saw some things on Pinterest and it was something that was easy enough that I could pick it up and you know, I practiced it out throughout the year and it was really fun, but then, you know, someone actually asked me to make her a picture of her house that she had just bought and so I did that. And she actually paid me, which was great. I felt like, man, I could make a business out of this, but at the same time, I was looking around Etsy, and I just saw a lot of people making customs for people's homes and you know, wedding dates and kids' names and that kind of thing. Seemed like there was a lot of that already. I wanted to do something new. I wanted to do something that I haven't seen before, and while I was thinking about all that, I kinda got this vision of that scene from *The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe*. That picture of Lucy and Mr. Tumnus near the lamppost and walking arm-in-arm.

I have seen a lot of visual interpretations of that scene before, but I've never seen one embroidered. I've never seen any scene from a book that was embroidered. It just kind of occurred to me, like why? Why haven't I seen that? I feel like that could be done. It took me a very long time to do it. [LAUGHS] I am very slow with embroidery, but I listened to a lot of your podcast. I listened to *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and I had been feeling a lot lately like reading's a very solitary act and so, spending time with my husband or with my daughter, it's very hard to do and read at the same time. [LAUGHS] This was something I felt like I could do and also like engage in conversation or listen to a book or a podcast together and you know, still feel like I'm engaging with someone else.

I sold that one pretty much right away and I've recently finished the portrait of Peter Rabbit, which was really fun. And that one's for sale right now, but right now, I'm working on a portrait of Anne Shirley from *Anne of Green Gables*. Also a scene from *Madeleine*, which-

[00:37:55]

ANNE: Aww.

HANNAH: Includes the house covered in vines and the 12 little girls. That one's really fun, and it's just fun to find what people are nostalgic for and what's special to them. It does make me think a lot more about the atmosphere in books and how I can translate that on to needle and thread.

ANNE: Hannah, has doing that embroidery change the way you read in anyway? I imagine that you really have to focus on the details of a scene and the picture the author drawing for you in order to bring it to life the way you've done.

HANNAH: Yeah, you know, I think I have definitely been using my imagination more, which I feel like I have always been really good at, but I am picturing more the scene that's laid out in front of me and you know, imagining the little details like the trees in the background or what color the sky is or what the characters look like specifically, not just like a general idea.

It definitely does make me pay attention more, not just to the overall atmosphere of the book, but also the little details, which I'm always really grateful for authors who can describe that really well, but even authors who don't necessarily. It's very fun to use my imagination in that way.

[00:39:06]

ANNE: Well I have books in mind for you. I don't know if you're going to want to embroider any of those.

HANNAH: [LAUGHS] That's okay.

ANNE: Hannah, I really want to focus on taking you around the world. I'm guessing that some of these books have been hard to find on your own, maybe they're hard to find when you shop your own bookshelves.

HANNAH: Mm-hmm. Yes.

ANNE: Okay. We've talked about some great books set all around the globe on the podcast in the past and since you referenced that you're 1/4 Japanese and you especially enjoy reading about books from that literary and cultural heritage, I would really recommend that you go check out Sachi Argabright episode if you haven't already. We'll get the number for you, readers, and we'll put that in show notes. But I want to find some ones that are less well known.

HANNAH: Yes.

ANNE: How do you feel about that?

HANNAH: That sounds great. I love finding new books that, you know, not a lot of people have heard of, right? I feel like I need that uniqueness in my literary life. [LAUGHS]

ANNE: And this doesn't necessarily mean that they aren't widely appreciated or that you never would have heard of them before, but these are the ones that I'm not seeing all over bookstagram or splashed all over the shelves of independent bookstores that I have gotten to visit these days.

The first I have in mind is *The Emissary* by Yoko Tawada. Is this a book that you're familiar with?

HANNAH: No. I've never heard of it.

ANNE: Okay. Tawada's CV is [LAUGHS] very impressive. She was born in Japan. Now she's based in Germany. She writes in both languages, but she reads in five.

HANNAH: Oh, my goodness.

[00:40:31]

ANNE: This book has definitely gotten literary attention. It won the National Book Award for translated literature. It's translated by Margaret Mitsutani, and obviously, if you didn't already know this, I can't read Japanese. [HANNAH LAUGHS] But the translation has been most praised for translating not only the prose, but the mood of the original.

This is a slim book, but it really manages to pack a lot in. This is dystopian Japanese fiction. The premise is there has been this massive disaster, no going back from, and Japan has cut itself off from the rest of the world. Tawada has said that as a reader, if you see parallels to the 2011 Fukushima disaster, yes, she was definitely inspired by that. And what happens is all countries shut down and don't allow people to go in and out. They're forced to fall back on their native resources.

So in *The Emissary*, there is a nuclear disaster. So you like a new spin on sci-fi, you can see if this feels like a new spin to you. I definitely found it an interesting and provocative one. After this nuclear meltdown, everyone is affected because the damage is so great and the repercussions so serious. But the citizens are affected differently depending on how old they are. The older citizens, the elderly, don't get sick and die. I wouldn't say they grow healthier, but ... And not only are they impervious to it, but now their lifespan is greatly extended following the disaster. However, the small children become very, very sick very, very rapidly. And this book focuses specifically on two people in a family. There's an older man. He's 108. [HANNAH LAUGHS] He's trapped with his grand- actually, I think it's his great grandson in this tiny, temporary house they're living in.

And so this old man who now cannot die watching his great-grandson grow old far before his time. He's watching his hair turn gray-

HANNAH: Oh, wow.

ANNE: And his teeth fall out, and he's getting so, so sick. This is just one family living out something that's happening in the whole society. But as life becomes so altered and so strange, it also becomes so precious in ways that Tawada explores that are really powerful.

Yes, this is a sad book. Yes, it does explore hard things, but the underlying theme throughout, especially as she nears the end is that life is precious and we should care well for those we love. I've described the small story about this 108-year man and his great-grandson, but

Tawada being who she is and feeling the way she feels about cultures and countries, there's deep symbolism throughout what she shows you and the really personal also has vast implications for the broader perspective. And that's really interesting also. How does that sound?

HANNAH: That sounds really fascinating. I'm really intrigued by that.

[00:43:33]

ANNE: I'm happy to hear it. I feel like all the titles, I'm like, ohh, this has such a great meditation on culture. This has such interesting things about identity, oh this takes you around the world, are all heavier. Are you okay with that? Or should we like pivot hard to the lighter as well?

HANNAH: I'm okay with both. I like heavy, but I feel like I do need to like kinda alternate between heavy and light because I do kinda get into a post-book depression. [BOTH LAUGH] After the really heavy ones, go through a period of mourning and transition out of it with the lighter books, so. [LAUGHS]

ANNE: Great. After you read your lighter book, try this one. [BOTH LAUGH] It's *Ghana Must Go* by Taiye Selasi. This came out in 2013 Do you know anything about Selasi?

HANNAH: No, I don't think so.

ANNE: Before this book came out, she published an essay. It's called *Bye, Bye Babar*. She introduced the term afropolitan, so I believe she has a TED talk on this. For listeners who are thinking, I've heard of her, but I've never read *Ghana Must Go*, why? That is probably why.

Selasi also identifies has someone whose identity is a cultural hybrid. She's of Nigerian and Ghanaian descent. She was born in London. She raised in Boston.

HANNAH: Oh, wow.

ANNE: But she's also lived in Berlin, Lisbon, and Rome. Actually I think she said something funny in an interview once. They said, wait, why don't you live in Paris? And she's like, I couldn't find an apartment. [HANNAH LAUGHS] But I could find one in Rome. You gotta decide somehow. She has a twin sister. These are things that you actually all see in her story.

So this is her debut novel. The title *Ghana Must Go*, she's referencing back in 1983 when Ghanaians were forced to leave Lagos. This book has action that takes place in Ghana, but it's an immigrant story above all. A lot of this is autobiographical. Selasi has talked at length about how she found a lot of sympathy for her family of origin in the process of telling the stories of this fictional family that was definitely largely inspired by her personal experience. She was writing about what she knew.

Something else I really like about this book is it's very detailed in its descriptions. The language is really flower-y. Some readers love that. Some readers don't. [HANNAH LAUGHS] But since it's so detailed and descriptive, I think you might love it. One of the main characters is a surgeon, born in Ghana, and that is Selasi's own story. Her father was a surgeon born in Ghana. The dad in the story, he comes to the east coast to accept a job. He's a hugely respected surgeon, wildly successful in his profession, but something happens very early in this story where he is put in an absolutely impossible situation. It's charged with racial bias, and it changes everything, both for this man and for this family.

What we get next is a very complex family saga as we see how the implications of this one event play out for this man and for his family. When he dies, his family reunites for the first time in ages and they go back to Ghana for his funeral. Selasi says while she was portraying very flawed characters, that she wants to give her reader a sense of even though they made decisions that are--she uses the word something like spectacularly terrible [HANNAH LAUGHS]. She really wants to give you a sense of why these people did what they did, how it was the only option they could really see available to them and how they were doing the best they could.

It is slow to start, but it really comes together in the end and I do think there is a subtle but present upbeat of hope. How does that sound to you?

[00:47:15]

HANNAH: That sounds really good. Portions of what you said reminded me of *The Interpreter of Maladies*, how Lahiri really makes you sympathize with some of these characters in her stories of the decisions they make which may not always be the right ones, but you see it from their perspective and I really enjoy that, understanding more of what's underneath a person rather than what you see on the outside. So that sounds really, really good.

ANNE: Yes, and I don't think that comparison to *Interpreter of Maladies* is a miss. The next book that I think might take you to a new place around the world is a memoir by Cinelle Barnes. It's called *Monsoon Mansion*. Is this one you're familiar with?

HANNAH: No, it is not.

ANNE: Oh, great, okay. This is a newer memoir and in many ways, it reads like a novel and it was just published in 2018. And it is a heart wrenching story, but something that's really fascinating about this book, Hannah, is the way I think you'll resonate with the writer's process. She's talked about this in interviews. This memoir about growing up in an actual mansion in the Philippines, this story begins when she's three. It ends when she's age 12. It is a coming-of-age story. It's a riches-to-rags story. [HANNAH LAUGHS] It's a survival story. It's bittersweet, but to be clear, mostly bitter. There's a strong note of hope at the end, and that comes from her unflagging courage in the face of just unimaginable circumstances and the fact that at the end, she escapes.

Her writing process though, I think you'll find fascinating. When Barnes had a baby, she was really drawn to be very reflective about her own childhood. She's watching her daughter begin her childhood and she's looking back to what she experienced when she grew up. What she did was so interesting. She said that her baby was a slow, slow feeder. Six times a day she had to sit down to nurse her. It took 40 minutes per nursing session. You read a lot when you were holding your baby. What Barnes did was she would sit down with a stack of index card and she would start writing notes to her baby about her childhood. And when she was done with the nursing, she ended up with three shoeboxes full of index cards [HANNAH LAUGHS] and thought, I have a story here.

So one day, she went with her husband and they laid them all out on the floor and they started putting together the story of her childhood. Her mom came from money. Her dad was a very successful international businessman and the house represented everything they had achieved in life. But this is a riches-to-rags story. When her mother loses a baby, she falls apart emotionally and she becomes subject to wild mood swings. She goes into fits of rage. She's no longer a safe person to be around to her family. Thanks to, of course, real life events in the Middle East, the once successful business run by her father begins to get shakier and shakier. So seeing clear, clear trouble on the horizon financially, they use all the resources they have remaining to turn this mansion into a place that they can rent out for events and for movie shootings [HANNAH LAUGHS] and things like that.

I live in Louisville, where everyone rents out their houses for the derby for the big bucks. This is totally what I am picturing. Then in a natural act that could not be more symobical, a record breaking monsoon comes and floods the home and ruins everything. It wipes them out basically and it scatters the family and brings new shady characters in to live with Barnes and her mother. I mean, they just endure misfortune after misfortune. It feels unrelenting. But she tells all this in a very lyrical voice. She's highly descriptive. I think you'll like that. You know she's telling you a true story, but it does in many ways read like a novel, and I think you enjoy stories that have that narrative drive and that symbolism that are very personal but also feel very universal.

When she's 12, she goes to live with a stepsister and she gets out. She says that she came to appreciate how beautiful a completely mundane life can be. So descriptive, so interesting, so unlike anything you would experience in your regular life I hope and pray. I don't know, what do you think?

[00:51:36]

HANNAH: That sounds really good. I don't know, just the idea of a riches-to-rags story, that sounds really intriguing too. [LAUGHS]

ANNE: I'm hoping you'll read some of these so you'll tell me what you think. Hannah, we talked about *The Emissary* by Yoko Tawada, *Ghana Must Go* by Taiye Selasi, and *Monsoon Mansion* by Cinelle Barnes. Of those three books, what do you think you'll read next?

HANNAH: I think I'll read *Ghana Must Go* next. That country, I don't know much about it and I haven't gone there yet, so I think that's what I'll read next.

ANNE: Well I am so interested to hear what you think. Thanks so much for talking books with me today.

[00:52:12]

HANNAH: Thanks for having me. This was a lot of fun.

[CHEERFUL OUTRO MUSIC]

ANNE: Hey readers, I hope you enjoyed my discussion with Hannah and I'd love to hear what YOU think she should read next. That page is at whatshouldireadnextpodcast.com/187 and it's where you'll find the full list of titles we talked about today. You can check out Hannah's literary embroidery at her Etsy shop. That's called EmbroiderhouseFive (etsy.com/shop/EmbroiderhouseFive). Yes, just like Slaughterhouse Five, but EmbroiderhouseFive.

Next week, What Should I Read Next is taking the week off, but we'll be back on June 18th with a truly wonderful episode I cannot wait for you to hear. If you need something to fill the gap, visit patreon.com/whatshouldireadnext for instant access to a vault of past behind-the-scenes episodes and bonus episodes of our sister show, One Great Book.

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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.