



WSIRN Episode 192: Wherever you read, I will follow
Hosted by Anne Bogel, with guests Rita and Xoe Amer

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XOE: I remember having the printed out manuscript just on regular printer paper and like reading it under the desk in the middle of science class. [ALL LAUGH]

[CHEERFUL INTRO MUSIC]

ANNE: Hey, readers. I'm Anne Bogel, and this is What Should I Read Next? Episode 192.

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.

Readers, today we're talking to the second mother-daughter duo in our show's history, and I couldn't be happier to welcome this Seattle pair to the show. Rita and Xoe Amer have always bonded over books, since Xoe was tiny. She's all grown up now, but the shared love of reading remains, and bonding over books is a key reason for their tight bond. Today we discuss their history together as readers and also, as you'll hear, writers, hidden gems from the past, and the great conversations that come from bad books. Let's get to it.

Rita and Xoe, welcome to the show.

RITA: Thank you, Anne.

XOE: Thanks for having us.

ANNE: It is my pleasure. I'm so excited to talk to another mother-daughter duo. Now, Rita, you were just telling me that you've listened to every episode of What Should I Read Next in its finished state, which is something that I have not done myself, but I believe this is our second

mother-daughter episode. Episode 111 with Emily and Daniela ran the day after Christmas in December 2017.

[00:01:34]

RITA: That was really sweet.

ANNE: Well something that they really shared in common with you all is that they had really gotten to know each other and really bonded through the years over the love of great books.

RITA: Yeah, I was touched when I read Xoe's comment to you about what sharing my reading meant to her.

ANNE: Oh. Xoe, would you tell us about that?

XOE: Yeah, absolutely. It's really wonderful obviously to have a parent who has such a love of books and then to be a part of that, but I'd say Mom definitely influenced my reading in several ways. She would just give me books that she thought I'd like that she'd never read before. And then two, recommend me books. And three, also read books that I recommended to her. So there was like a back and forth. As a kid, I'd love fantasy and certain other things, but as an adult, I think we've really kind've come together I guess in terms of our taste and everything.

It's been wonderful to have somebody who has such omnivorous taste. I'd say like Mom's taste is incredibly eclectic in books and movies and everything, and then like really have somebody who you feel like is an authority to be like this is the good stuff, kid. [ANNE LAUGHS] We've had great conversations about it. When you read a great piece of literature you can really dig into, talking about human relationships in general and emotions and things like that.

RITA: It's great to hear that because, Anne, you know, you having four kids, I'm sure you experience this. When she was in middle school, whatever, I would find something fantastic, you know, that I would offer her. Xoe, we should read this, and she'd be like yeah, and I'd be like, oh, yeah, oh, come on. Eh, maybe. [ANNE LAUGHS] And then two months, two months later I'd swear, not two months later [XOE LAUGHS] I see her reading in her room that very book and oh, my friend Morgan told me about it and I'm reading it because she recommended it to me. ANd I'm like grrr.

XOE: [LAUGHS] I don't know what book this is that she has such a vendetta about for the record. I don't know what it is.

ANNE: There's probably so many of them. [XOE LAUGHS]

RITA: There is ... There's more than one. [LAUGHS]

[00:03:35]

ANNE: Not to project my own family experience onto your all's relationship, but yes, this is sounding very familiar. [XOE AND RITA LAUGH] But Xoe, you made it through and you still love to read today.

XOE: Oh, absolutely. And definitely a big part of it. I got to travel a couple of years ago for like a very extended period of time like nine months. Mom was kind of my life line. Like I could pick up a book here and there in a hostel. I'd have people come to visit me and I'd be like, "Give me some books." And Mom would get to curate those and everything, and I think that was really the renaissance in our reading life together.

ANNE: Oh, that's so sweet. I think it's really telling that you all have chosen to create a podcast where you get to discuss books and movies and general interests as well, if I'm not mistaken.

RITA: And sandwiches.

ANNE: Oh, well, see, the important things.

RITA: [LAUGHS] Well actually that was Xoe's idea. There's a place here in Seattle called Central Cinema and they will often have old movies. It's a really fun place to go, and you can have dinner and so forth. And so we go and see *Casablanca* or something, *The Big Sleep*. You know, my classics, or we would read books together and we'd be sitting there chatting and talking and analyzing and you know, applying to them real life situations or art. And Xoe said, you know, you love podcasts so much, Mom, why don't we do a podcast together? Having conversations that we're going to have anyway? It was kind of thrilling to have her suggest that. You know, when your kid gets older, you're like the child craving the attention, you know? [RITA AND ANNE LAUGH] To any approval. And that kinda reminded me of the time she suggested for Christmas that we get matching tattoos and that was like, oh, she wants to do matching tattoos with her mom. [XOE LAUGHS]

ANNE: Well what did you choose?

RITA: From *The Fire Cat* by Esther Averill, which was one of those you can read books from back in the '50s or '60s that I had read to her. It was a cherished childhood favorite of mine, and I read it to Xoe, and so we decided that on our calves, we would each have Pickles, the fire cat.

XOE: Right.

RITA: Who is neither good nor bad, bad nor good, but simply-

XOE: He's a mixed up cat.

RITA: [LAUGHS] Yeah. I might be quotating that on my deathbed. I love that section so much.

[00:05:43]

XOE: It's a great book.

ANNE: I love it. Is this one of those books that you heard enough as a child that now you can quote whole pages?

XOE: So Mom used to read it to me but then in high school, somehow, I got on this kick of bringing people over to my house [ANNE LAUGHS] and I read this picture book to them. And so all my friends have heard it too. We have that book pretty well engraved on our hearts. A funny thing actually. I was just in a tattoo parlor a couple of days ago. I've got a lot of tattoos. I was sitting there in the chair and one of the tattoo artists walks up and goes, "Oh, Pickles the fire cat."

ANNE: No.

XOE: And nobody ever recognizes this tattoo. It's been like one person.

RITA: Do you remember that time that we got pedicures together and the lady who was giving me my pedicure, she recognized Pickles the fire cat.

XOE: You're right. Right. 'Cause she had used it to learn how to read in English. But this tattoo artist also recognized it and he said he'd done one other Pickles the fire cat tattoo.

ANNE: Wow.

XOE: We have a third out there.

ANNE: Oh, this is the beginning of a really creepy mystery novel.

RITA: [LAUGHS] Yeah. Oh, I could then see the plot go now.

XOE: Speaking of mystery novels, it kind of leads to another aspect of our reading life together which is that Mom's a writer too. And she wrote a book for me when I was a kid. It's called *Cat With A Golden Fang*.

ANNE: Rita, have you written anything besides the *Cat With A Golden Fang*? Or were you driven by your life circumstances?

RITA: I was an academic for awhile. I have a degree in dance history, so I would do research and write academic type articles. But that's the one piece of fiction that I've been able to squeeze out. That personal motivation of doing that for Xoe really spurred me to make the time to do it. I also wrote it for myself I've realized. I was thinking about that this morning talking to you. I didn't come from a family of readers. Neither my parents read except my dad read the

newspaper. I didn't see books in the house other than maybe *Cat In The Hat* and the absolutely required set of encyclopedia britannica in the living room. [LAUGHS] So there's no reading in my house, and they didn't read to me, and the day I learned to read was one of the best days of my life. And I can remember one day not being able to read and the next day being able to read. And I know that there was some pedagogy that went in there somewhere, but I don't remember any of it. I just remember suddenly feeling that I was an independent individual human being 'cause I could pick up a book and I could read it and I didn't have to beg anybody to read to me. And how meaningful and important that was and how fast my reading progressed. And I would have loved to have had *Cat With A Golden Fang* to read when I was a kid.

[00:08:07]

XOE: This is all new to me. That's really wonderful.

RITA: Yeah. I hadn't thought of it. I hadn't connected the two, and then what I saw was Xoe. She had plenty of stuff to read and was always reading. Not having anything that an eight-year-old or a nine-year-old that was challenging to her as a reader and appropriate for her age ... The subject matter being appropriate because she was reading a lot of books about you know, kids facing drugs or dating or she was reading more adult type books and it would have been nice to have stayed in her innocence a little bit more. A little bit longer [LAUGHS] if you will. And that's sorta what I wanted to do was give her something challenging and exciting and fun, but still innocent.

ANNE: Rita, that is something that I hear from readers all the time. Sometimes they're looking for commiseration and sometimes they're looking for some specific book recommendations, but what they say is that they have a child who reads at quite a high level, but that means the books that match their reading level have emotional content that is far beyond what they're able to handle. But most of them don't go and write novels for their daughter, so what happened once you realized that Xoe could really benefit by having something else to read than what was available to her at the time?

RTA: I was in a place too where I was feeling very creative I think. It took a long time to write and I did do a lot of revisions. And I didn't know what was going to happen with the story and so I was just kinda writing as it came to me. It ended up being a mystery. There ended up being a big twist at the end that I didn't know was coming, and I swear, I sat there. I wrote it and I went no way! That's what it is? Oh, my gosh. I mean I was like blown away by the twist 'cause I didn't even know it was coming. And so that was so much fun and I took the manuscript and I gave it to Xoe and asked her to be my editor. And I said, could you read this and give me feedback on it? And so she read the manuscript and she pointed out some very great, really good logical flaws in the story that I was like ugh, you're right. I gotta fix that. [XOE LAUGHS] That doesn't make sense, you know, how did he get from here to there. And she not only was the audience, she was also part of the process in the editing. And then I found an artist in Indonesia. Fantastic graphic artist who did ... The book has 26 illustrations in it. He did the cover and the illustrations for me and it was really wonderful working with this young man, even though there was

somewhat of a language barrier, he really got it. You know? And then I used Amazon CreateSpace to actually create a real book. So it's got a real cover. It's got a shiny, like kind of a trade paperback to it. It's actually on Amazon, like a real book.

[00:10:45]

ANNE: A real book.

RITA: It was really exciting.

ANNE: Xoe, was that the beginning of a very successful editing career? [RITA AND XOE LAUGH]

XOE: Actually I did. I have gone on to edit a lot of different things. That was fun for me. I remember having the printed out manuscript just on regular printer paper and like reading it under the desk [ANNE LAUGHS] in the middle of science class or something in elementary school, which was fine. I passed that class [RITA LAUGHS] with a great grade. I'm sure that helped me go on and I ended up doing a lot of poetry and whatnot in college, and worked at the literary arts magazine at my community college for a year putting out a book. And I love editing. It really like is such a wonderful, collaborative experience because you get to both build someone up and then help them improve on what they're making. And so you end up looking for the best things about the work, and that's my favorite part of editing, is you don't look for the flaws. You look for the best parts of it.

ANNE: Readers, my kids just began school sports workouts. And while they are practicing very early in the morning, it's still hot out there in the upper south. That's why this time of year I much prefer to workout indoors.

For that, try OpenFit, the simple streaming service that let you 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. Or going outside in the heat.

OpenFit gives you complete flexibility to watch at home, from any device, at any time that suits you, and they give you flexible programming as well. They know that everyone's bodies are different—and so are their fitness goals!—so they personalize to your needs with custom-tailored original content.

I love the Barre type workouts so Andrea Rogers' Extende Barre is perfect for me, but if you want something more dynamic, OpenFit has a new program called Rough Around the Edges, a series of high-octane workouts that include cardio, MMA, HIIT, dance and more. Workouts that leave you feeling fit, fierce and incredibly powerful.

Again it's all personalized and tailored to your needs. So, as they say, you do you.

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 get full access to OpenFit—all the workouts including Barre, Yoga, and Rough Around the Edges, plus nutrition information—all TOTALLY FREE. Again—just text READ to 303030.

Standard Message and data rates may apply.

Readers, I get a lot of email, some exciting, some not at all, but what I always look forward to is my weekly meal plan from PrepDish.

Every Friday PrepDish emails me a week's worth of healthy, whole food based meals. Meals like curry chicken skewers and yogurt sauce with asparagus and watermelon, and grilled shrimp kabobs with goat cheese, cucumber and grilled peach salad.

Not only am I inspired to make great tasting meals when I look at these menus, but with PrepDish's shop once, prep once philosophy it's so much easier to make those wished-for healthy meals a reality. Just print out your plan, do all of your shopping, and then in one go you do your chopping, marinating, and prepping for all 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.

Right now you can take care of your meal planning for the whole summer with a premium PrepDish subscription. Prep Dish offers a variety of meal plans to fit any lifestyle including Paleo, Gluten Free, and Keto.

Check out PrepDish.com/readnext to start your free 2-week trial. Again, that's PrepDish.com/readnext.

ANNE: Now, Rita, we know that you're an eclectic reader and, Xoe, I'm very interested in hearing about your reading taste as well. I'm not really sure how we're going to recommend books for the both of you to read. I can imagine there are a million possibilities [XOE LAUGHS] or at least a solid 100 that we could go through. But you all know how this works. You are each going to tell me three books you love, one book you don't, and what you've been reading lately. Rita, your list is so long. It sounds like you read a ton right now.

[00:14:59]

RITA: I do. And I have had a longer life than Xoe, so I've had more books in it, you know?

ANNE: [SIGHS] Very much hope that I get to be one of those older readers one day who does have many, many decades of reading experience to remember and draw from, but I'm not there yet. And I'm jealous, Rita.

XOE: [LAUGHS] Me, too.

RITA: The other end of that is, is that I have a more limited time left to read new books, so I've become very, very tyrannical about my reading. It's like hey, if this doesn't grab me, if I can tell even from the first page, done. Because I don't have time. I've kind of calculated how many more books I've had left in my life if I live to a certain age [LAUGHS] and I just go, "No. Done." And so I will go through books so fast because I'll go no, this is not it. This is not it.

ANNE: I thought you were going to say oh the joy of having all those books to look forward to.

RITA: [LAUGHS] You see, this is my cynicism coming through.

ANNE: I like that you're taking your reading life seriously.

RITA: The transcendent sensation of reading a book that does get inside and touch you and shift you and bring you in almost a collision in someone else's consciousness is such a moving and important experience. I don't want to waste my time on books if I know I'm just reading them to get through them or they're just okay. That doesn't mean they can't be fun. 'Cause I love a fun book.

ANNE: Well I'm looking forward to hearing more about that. Xoe, how do you feel about going first?

XOE: Honestly I think my list is much shorter. I brought a curated sampling for you.

ANNE: Ooh, I like the way you're thinking about this.

XOE: [LAUGHS] So, for my top three favorites, how I thought about it was I wanted to give you a book from each ... Maybe each important aspects of my reading, so I didn't decide to go with three pieces of great literature or anything like that to bring something that was meaningful or impactful to me at different times of my life. I picked a book of poetry, I picked a piece of literature, and I picked a young adult novel. Really, it's a series.

And so this first one is *Protector of the Small* by Tamora Pierce. It's a fantasy series where sometimes women go and train to be knights. And so this is about a woman who goes to the royal academy and learns how to be a knight, and it's very like, you know, feminist, like, girls

can be and do whatever they want to do. And so she learns to fight and she's really great at leading people and everything. So it was like a very inspiring series to me when I was younger.

[00:17:31]

ANNE: Do you continue to read fantasy today?

XOE: Definitely. I have to pick and choose 'cause I don't have as much time to read as I did. I used to just be voracious, but that was one of my first genres. And that was a genre that my dad really loved as well, and so he gave me a lot of books. One that I've never finished is *Watership Down*. Someday I'll get back to that.

ANNE: I didn't read that until I was an adult. I mean, just a few years ago I finished that.

XOE: It's a book full of tragedy and horror, really.

ANNE: And I mean, it's about bunnies. Who knew how much was underneath that very deceptive cover. [XOE LAUGHS] Okay, so you have some fantasy to look forward to in your reading life is what you're saying.

XOE: Absolutely. There is never a dearth of fantasy. [ANNE LAUGHS]

So my second book that I picked was a book of poetry. One that I think very few people will have actually read because it comes from kinda a local press here in Seattle called Chin Music. They publish sorta unusual books as very much art objects so the books themselves are really beautiful. And they tend to have a focus on crossovers between Japan and America. This book is by a poet named Yoshinori Henguchi called *Lizard Telepathy, Fox Telepathy*. And it has - it has his photography in it as well as his poetry and then it has these dual translations. And I loved the object of the book itself because it's really beautiful. The way it's laid out is really interesting. They don't put the poems next to each other. They do translations. They're all kinda mixed and interspersed throughout so you really look at the shape of each poem. It's just a beautiful book, and it has a very eclectic sensibility to it and kinda a surrealist sensibility to it where you read it and the poems aren't straightforward necessarily. They have a lot of wacky things happening in them. And it just really inspired me when I was learning to write poetry in college and everything.

ANNE: How did you pick this one up? Is it because it is local or is it because of your connection to that world?

XOE: To some degree it is because it is local. We actually have a bookstore in Seattle that's poetry only.

ANNE: I didn't know that. What's it called?

[00:19:33]

XOE: I think it's the only one in the nation. It's called Open Books, for the record. And I just like to go in there sometimes and browse and pick up some poetry and hope that serendipitously I'll find something that I really connect with. I was trawling the shelves and the title really caught my eye.

ANNE: I can see why. [XOE LAUGHS] Xoe, what did you choose for your final favorite? Is this the one representing did you say a great work of literature?

XOE: Yeah, this is kinda my adult favorite. It's a book as Mom described it earlier that was a really transcendent reading experience that she shifted and really moved something inside when I read it. It's *To The Lighthouse* by Virginia Woolf. I wouldn't be surprised if someone on this show has picked it before. It's a really incredible book and it kinda straddles literature and poetry, I'd say, for Virginia Woolf's style is so poetic and stream of consciousness and phenomenal. The central metaphor of the book, which is the lighthouse, also does what I think great poetry does which is kinda encapsulate this really profound sense of like life and death being kinda next to each other. I don't know. It's just a wonderful book.

RITA: I mean, Anne, can you see why I have such great conversations about literature? [RITA AND XOE LAUGH]

ANNE: Anyway who can use the words transcendence reading experience and telepathy in one conversation, I think, would be a worthy literary chatting companion.

RITA: I get so much out of conversations.

ANNE: I'm sure you do. Xoe, I always am interested in hearing how readers approach how they choose their favorites, and I do love that you've chosen these books that represent different pieces of your reading life. It does make it a little harder to draw together a composite, so we're going to keep talking.

XOE: Here's the thing: You can recommend me almost any genre and I will enjoy a good book in that genre, I guess is the takeaway there. The last book that I like applied and ending up changing was a graphic novel, *Uzumaki* by Junji Ito and it's like a horror graphic novel. So yeah, it is kinda a disparate collection of books.

ANNE: You contain multitudes.

XOE: Right. [LAUGHS]

ANNE: Okay, let's see where you get it from. Rita, it's your turn.

[00:21:36]

RITA: Okay. I tried to pick three disparate books in terms of genre, but that have a golden thread running through them for me. And I thought about this so hard, Anne. And one of the reasons I'd never applied before is I thought, I have no idea how to express this because it's really elusive. Then I read this great book, it's called *Lincoln's Virtues: An Ethical Biography* and in it, the author describes the writings of Thomas Jefferson versus Abraham Lincoln and I thought, oh my Gosh, that describes it. I think if I tell Anne that, she'll be able to flex her Rosie the Riveter muscles and get me some really good books around this.

The author said that Thomas Jefferson is a great writer obviously, but when you read his writing you're connecting with the mind. You know, it's brilliant. It's mental. It's intellectual. But with Abraham Lincoln, even though he was also brilliant, his writing was embodied. His writing, his words, his expression flowed through his emotions and his body and his lived experience to kinda come out on the paper. It creates a very different feeling when you read Lincoln versus when you read Jefferson. And I've noted that that's the kind of books that I want to read for the rest of my life.

Something can be written extremely beautifully and yet not touch that cord at all, even though the writing is very good. And something can be written in a mediocre fashion, but it touches that cord so beautifully and just one example of that that I know you'll know is I personally don't think that *The Sparrow*, the writing is the greatest writing I've ever read. But it touches the cord because it's so immediate, it's so embodied and it's so felt, you are just wrapped up in that world and in the writer's consciousness about the world. And so that's like an example of one where maybe the writing isn't - it's not Dostoyevsky. But it's the kind of book I want to read. So that was - that was an extra one that I'm stuffing into the podcast. [RITA AND ANNE LAUGH]

And the first one I chose called *An Infinity of Little Hours* by Nancy Maguire. Do you know that book?

ANNE: I do not.

RITA: Oh, Anne, Anne. I think you would love it. Just from hearing what you do love. It's a nonfiction book written about five young men in the 1960s who became clostured I say it? Carthusians monks. They basically go into a little cell, they're clostured. They don't talk to anybody from one end of the day to another. The only time they see people is when they silently process into do their praising and singing and so forth, and then they process out. And they might have a lunch with each other, maybe once a month and that's the only time they get to talk to another human being. And of course the purpose of their life is to meditate, to pray, to go deeper and deeper into their own spiritually and their own soul. To commune with their own souls. This book is written amazingly by a woman. One of the men, or several of them actually, ended up leaving the order and she married one of them. The way in which she-

ANNE: Wait, what?

[00:24:46]

RITA: Yes. He left the order and became a layperson and she married him and that's how she learned this story. And she is writing a nonfiction book about it.

ANNE: Oh, so she wasn't a writer who fell in love with one of her subjects.

RITA: No, no.

ANNE: Either way, it's a great story.

RITA: And she gets inside the detail. I mean, I would be reading, going [GASPS] what are they going to have for lunch today? Everything was ... It was granular, but it was engaging. It was visceral. It brought me into both their physical and their spiritual lives. I don't know. I can't say enough about it. I found it a spiritual experience just reading the book as well as a great literary experience. And I think you would like it, Anne. I do.

ANNE: That sounds so interesting.

RITA: It's rare you can say how beautiful a book is, and I loved it so much. And then I'm going to shift over to something light and fun and adventurous. It's called *Something Missing* by Matthew Dicks. And it's a little bit of a thriller, kinda a cozy thriller if you will, and the main character's a thief. He's so interesting. He basically has what he calls clients. He surveils people and he picks them out, and then he gets into their homes and he goes and visits them if you will on a weekly basis. And he makes his living by he gets to know their lives so well that like you go, okay, they went shopping this week and there's a jar of pickles in the back and now they're not going to miss that jar of pickles 'cause they just bought a new jar of pickles, so clearly they've forgotten about that jar of pickles. Or he'll take like a necklace or an earring and he'll hide it in the bottom of their jewelry case. If it's gone, they'll be able to find it so they won't know that they're being stolen from, but he'll come back week after week and if he notices that they haven't noticed that it's gone, then he'll take it. And so he makes his living this way. The minutiae was fascinating. And it's so clever. And he's not a bad guy. He's not ever going to hurt anybody. He would never go there when anybody was home. It is creepy, yes, I know that. [ANNE LAUGHS]

But ... And I don't want to give too much away, but as the story evolves, more things happen, and other individuals come in who are not benign. He becomes the protagonist and hero of the book in that way. But it was a bit of a romp. It was joyous. I could just feel this author was just in this person's skin. He was walking in his skin, and the author obviously must be a decent person, and so his character's a decent person, even though he's doing these nefarious things. And I like that. I like that tension. That balance that he hits very well. It's, you know, not a great work of literature. The writing is not gem-like or anything like that. It's workman like. It takes you right along. It's fun, and it's got that presence. The author is present as a person in the book. I can just feel him in there.

The last one, I'm going for kind of a deep cut, is from 1940.

[00:27:35]

ANNE: Ooh.

RITA: By a guy named Frank Baker. It's called *Miss Hargreaves*. And it is a delight. This is another little ... This is a little gem that I am so glad that I found. It is about these two young men, two young roustabouts, English roustabouts, you know, for a lark. They make up this fake, old lady who, I think he says is his cousin, or something. And she's really eccentric and she's got this parrot. And they really, you know, tell people about her and they use her as an excuse to get out of things. And all of a sudden one day, knock on the door, and who's there but Miss Hargreaves. This figment that they made up has come to life. And she comes into this guy's life and she just turns it topsy turvy and he can't figure out what to do and how does he get rid of her, but then she's like this kinda alive creature now. She's like a real person, so he has certain qualms and guilt and so forth. Kinda like *Dr. Frankenstein*, except he actually has a good moral sense [LAUGHS] and he sees her as a person, so he's not going to be mean to her.

This one sticks the ending. And that's something that I love about a really great book. They get to the end, you're going along and along, it's good, it's interesting, and sometimes they don't stick the ending. The ending kinda goes flabby. And you're like ugh, all right. The rest of the book was good. And this one it just takes you right to that end and it's just like a little pinpoint boom, perfect.

ANNE: I know I've read another book where people have conjured real characters into being.

RITA: Ooh.

ANNE: I don't ... What are they? I don't know! [XOE LAUGHS] I'm going to remember in the shower later today. Xoe, you said that you could read any number of books in different genres and enjoy them all if they're great books.

XOE: Right.

ANNE: They're not all great books, so now's your chance to tell me about a book that did not work for you.

XOE: [RITA LAUGHS] Yeah, *The Magicians* by Lev Grossman was what I kinda ended up putting in here. It's an example of a fantasy book. This is a book that is really popular, definitely a bestseller, and the thing is has a lot of merits, but I just ... I hate-read this book. I hated it as I could not stop reading it and trying to pick it apart. [ANNE LAUGHS] If he wrote this book as, you know, a provocative piece, it definitely worked.

It's a fantasy book that's supposed to sorta take you from *Narnia* and like the place of maybe the *Chronicles of Narnia* to an adult place. He throws in a bunch of different genres; I guess time travel's in there and all these other fantasy tropes. And there's so much that's really clever about this book, about the character who, you know, learns how to do magic. There's hot *Harry Potter* elements and everything. But there are more like real consequences and grittiness to the book itself, but kinda there's an arrogance to the storytelling, which I'm sure Lev Grossman is a wonderful person, but I don't know, there was just something so infuriating about the flavor of the book because it really took these tropes and conventions and said like I'm going to play with them, but then didn't end up having better continuity than the source materials or having something that made it work logically. The internal logic of the book and everything. I don't know. It just - it frustrated me a lot and the main character also was just kinda a brat. But it was a really polarizing book for me, like I still read the entire thing, and vent about it and complain about it to Mom.

[ANNE LAUGHS]

[00:31:05]

RITA: I read it too, and I understand exactly. There was some really good stuff in that book, and I understand why people like it, but Xoe and I both felt that the author felt that he was above his material.

XOE: Yes. That's it.

ANNE: So it just came off as condescending.

RITA: Yeah.

XOE: To some degree, yeah, totally. And so that's why I couldn't enjoy it. I didn't even want to ... Like I didn't want to enjoy it. [RITA AND XOE LAUGH]

ANNE: Okay. We'll try to find you some books with a little more soul.

XOE: [LAUGHS] Thanks.

ANNE: Rita, what hasn't worked out for you?

RITA: Well this one, again, I tried to choose something that would illustrate the Jefferson side of the dichotomy here. I've chosen *Flaubert's Parrot* by Julian Barnes. Actually pretty much anything Julian Barnes has written. And it guts me because his books, especially *Flaubert's Parrot*, has everything I love. It has history. It has literary references. It's got whimsy. You know, real intelligence. It's well written. You know, you think, oh checking my list, and Julian Barnes from what I've seen interviews with him appears to be a really gracious English gentlemen, you

know, like a good person. But when I read it, it is so intellectual; it is so mental that I don't feel a sense of that gracious English gentlemen in the book.

[00:32:20]

ANNE: So it's got the right ingredients, but it doesn't touch the cord.

RITA: Yeah, exactly.

ANNE: Xoe, what have you been reading lately? You don't have to apologize or say you haven't been reading a lot lately. [XOE LAUGHS] Two books is completely acceptable.

XOE: [RITA LAUGHS] Yeah, I was going to say this is going to be nice and simple for you. I do have a lot of books that have bookmarks in them on my shelf that I've been reading for years.

ANNE: Oh, we can go to that support group together.

XOE: Maybe somebody I'll finish these books. But the one that I have been actively been reading is *Wuthering Heights*, another classic. So this is one that Mom encouraged me to read because it is one of her favorite classic novels. Over the years, I tried. I picked it up a number of times and couldn't get past the first page. I know that my reading level is certainly high enough to read it, but the style did kind've set me back for a long time and made it hard to engage with.

And we also watched miniseries of *Wuthering Heights* or a movie, you know, when I was younger and I do remember I disappointed Mom a lot by being like ahh, can't handle this, it's too corny. It's too like romantic and gross. [LAUGHS] It took the right set of time and circumstances for me to like come into my own to read this book because I'm loving it now. Got past that first page and kinda got used to the style. I don't know. I've been in a lot more relationships since I was 13, so even if it is really melodramatic to some degree or just very intense, I can now glean like the feeling and potency of the writing of like the romance in the novel and everything. I'm digging it.

ANNE: Rita, since you've listened to every episode, you probably know that this was a book that was not for me.

RITA: I know. Uh-huh. In a way, I kinda encouraged Xoe to bring it up because I thought it would be interesting to get another point of view because I know that's one that you didn't care for. And one thing that I proposed to Xoe is to look at it not as much as these are actual people, but that Emily Bronte was raised isolated on the moors, imagine these girls in the dark kitchen, the wind howling, and then their servants would like tell them ghost stories and myths from the time and everything was very large and overblown and they were being raised at the time of the romantic period was blossoming. So, really, it seemed to me this book is more along the lines of reading Greek mythology or reading Norse mythology than it is reading about people. That

kinda gives me a different perspective on it than I don't have to like them. Doesn't matter whether I like them or not. It's about their elemental influences.

[00:34:53]

XOE: Yeah, that's one thing that I love about it is just the amoral quality of the characters. Or the two main characters Cathy and Heathcliff especially is just you can't relegate them to morality.

ANNE: I'm a little distracted that the word relegate was what kicked me out of the state spelling bee in third grade. [RITA LAUGHS]

XOE: Oh, really?

ANNE: I put an I in the middle. Mm-hmm.

XOE: Yikes, sorry to bring up a traumatic episode in your past. [RITA LAUGHS] I didn't know I'd step in a landmine with that one. [ALL LAUGH]

ANNE: But, yes, that's an excellent point. That when you read it through that lens, you can have a lot more patience with their decisions.

XOE: [LAUGHS] Yeah.

ANNE: Rita, what are you reading right now?

RITA: Well, one book that I discovered in a library sale. I read this in grade school. Do you remember those flyers that they used to give ... Anne, I don't know if they still did it. You're a lot younger than I am. I think they were Scholastic books and you'd get this little pamphlet and it would have all these books listed and you'd check the books you wanted.

ANNE: Oh, yeah, they still send those home.

RITA: Oh, do they? Oh my Gosh. It was the highlight of my year. Oh. And when I was a kid, the books were like between .35 and .75 cents, so I could get a lot because my parents were willing to, you know, that wasn't that much money.

ANNE: That has actually changed.

RITA: [LAUGHS] Yeah, I'm sure. Oh my Gosh, I can't even imagine. It must be so expensive now. And so I would always have the biggest pile of books. I always knew which was my pile because it was always at least twice as high as anybody else's pile. And one of these that I got, I can't believe they had this in Scholastic books. It's *The Lives and Times of Archy and Mehitabel* by Don Marquis. Have you ever read that?

[00:36:25]

ANNE: I have not.

RITA: It's actually poetry. It was written around the turn of the 20th century, and Don Marquis he was a newspaper guy and he had a column. So he decided to write this kinda poetical stuff because the margins could be really wide and he could write less. It's an ongoing series about a cockroach and a cat, and the cockroach is Archy, and at night when the office is closed up, he jumps on the keys of the typewriter and he writes all these columns and poems. And his friend is the cat, Mehitabel, who in a past life was Cleopatra.

ANNE: Oh, wow.

RITA: It's wacky. It's clever. And the illustrations that are done are by George Herriman or Edward Herriman. I think it's George Herriman, who did the Crazy Cat comics back in the day, in the '20s. The illustrations and the poetry are equal partners in this. It is so delightful. So crazy. So whimsical. You do have to have a little bit of sense of being okay with the past, you know, with the way things are said in the past. There's a lot of jargon and slang from the past, so you kinda have to be patient with ... Sometimes you have to look stuff up you know just to kinda know what something meant. But mostly it's witty. Witty as all get out ... Both illustrations and the poetry.

And one of the things that I think is very fascinating is that the illustrator is actually a Black man who was passing as white at the time. And when you know that and you look at his illustrations, it really gives a new meaning. You begin to see that there's depths that he's bringing things to that a lot of the times, the white eyes at the time wouldn't have been able to discern, but then you see it and you go, wow. You know, that is really clever.

ANNE: Xoe, you had mentioned on our submission form that you would love to read a bit more that deals with world history. You also mentioned that you would love to make a career as a pulp romance novelist. So I can't let that little drop go by.

XOE: [LAUGHS] So I would totally take a recommendation of a pulpy romance novel if you have anything. I'm not sure what it is, but I love that genre so much. I don't know, maybe it's irony poisoning as they say these days, but I love pieces of media that just make me laugh, that are so like fondly human. So that's what I love the romance genre for or the erotica fiction genre, or what have you. And I would really love to yeah, just dip my toes into that. If I could make a portion of my income off of writing something as ridiculous as *Lunch After Dark* [ANNE LAUGHS] or something like that [LAUGHS] I would do it. Maybe that's going to be the title of my forthcoming erotic novel.

ANNE: Tell me about your world history interests.

[00:39:06]

XOE: Well especially having a mom with so much vast knowledge and interests in world history and everything, we have a lot of really interesting conversations and I get a lot of fascinating information about the world and history through her and her explaining her reading to me and whatnot. But I would really enjoy something that gives a broader sense of tying together world history and events. Yeah, I don't know. I do a lot of reading that is very fiction based but I love the genre of alternative history and things like that, so, I'm very open to that and would love to, like, get some concrete information out of a book that I read soon.

ANNE: Okay. And Rita, what are you looking for in your reading life?

RITA: Forgotten little gems of books and what made me think of this was I recently read Edith Warton novellas, one was called *The Touchstone* and the other *Bunner Sisters*. They were fantastic. So worth my time to read. They were beautifully written. They were interesting and perspective. And I would like to find some more books that have kinda been lost and are really still worth reading.

ANNE: Readers, when I talked to Beth recently in episode 190 she described herself as a life-long learner. And she credits the Great Courses for helping her make up for the dearth of humanities courses in her med school curriculum.

If you consider yourself a life-long learner do yourself a favor and check out The Great Courses Plus. This streaming learning service offers courses in literature, history, and the sciences so you can fill in where your schooling left off or just scratch a curious itch.

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ANNE: So, you both have eclectic reading taste on your own and when you look at your reading lives as a composite because I'd really like to find books that you both could enjoy, it both makes it harder because your reading lives are so different and it easier because it considerably helps narrow down. Xoe's a poetry lover. Rita, it looks like you go towards more classic, older books.

[00:42:11]

RITA: Yeah, generally speaking, I guess those have been ones that are stuck in my head.

XOE: She's quite a modern reader but she's not a poetry lover.

RITA: I kinda have in my head it's "poh-eh-try", and I don't care for generally "poh-eh-try" even though my daughter is a poet and I do respect that. [XOE LAUGHS]

ANNE: What is it about poetry?

RITA: It is so dense and so rich that I can only consume maybe a line or two and then I just can't take anymore.

XOE: Well I think two that you want to dig into people and relationships, which can be a lot harder to convey in poetry.

RITA: That's true.

XOE: Or to talk about. It's much more about the individual moment and experience. You're also not a lover of the surreal, which is all too common in poetry.

RITA: She knows.

ANNE: Do you think there's hope for her though, Xoe? I mean, do you think you could find a way in?

XOE: Oh, absolutely. She's loosened up considerably over the years on her anti-poetry platform [RITA LAUGHS] because she started saying okay, okay, I like some of the rhymey-wimey stuff. I like T.S. Elliott [ANNE LAUGHS] I like this and that. And then she started coming to me like oh,

and I heard this slam poet in a podcast and it's really kinda atypical slam poem and it tells this amazing story and I loved it. So, yeah, she's ... It's a slippery slope and she's sliding down it a little bit.

[00:43:28]

ANNE: Okay. We're going to start with poetry since that is your daughter's field, but we're going to wade you in gently.

RITA: All right. I appreciate that.

ANNE: I know a lot of people think that they don't like poetry because I think they get this idea that nothing means what it says and can't you just be clear and take off your beret and put down your little Paris pipe and get over yourself and just say words in order that makes. [XOE LAUGHS] But poets are really careful with their words and they know how to weld them for maximum emotional effect. And that's something that you like. Also they can do it very densely and since you mentioned feeling like you might only have so many books left in your life. I mean, all of us only have so many books left in our lives [RITA LAUGHS] but you wouldn't necessarily know that was true for me based on the way that I make some of my reading decisions.

There is a poet. She is the Poet Laureate of Mississippi. Her name is Beth Ann Fennelly and she has written some short pieces, and I think you're going to like her. Possibly be willing to branch out into her other works. So I'm going to throw three books at you because if you can save time by reading short books, then you read more of them. [RITA LAUGHS] I'll give you three of them so it's not really a net gain, but hopefully it is for your reading life.

The first is *Heating and Cooling*. These are 52 micro memoirs and it is just that. They are stories of things that happened to her and some are just a few sentences long. The longest ones are a few pages. They're true, and they read more as moments than as short stories. But what she does so well here is talk about relationships in a way that is evocative and gripping and visceral, three things that you really like. And oh, she can so powerfully write about desperately having to pee, [RITA LAUGHS] but then about something awful that happened in her family that really stung that still sticks with her. And I think as humans we can relate to both the comic and the tragic, and because these are so short and so compact, it's almost whiplash-y going from one stop on the spectrum of human emotions to another so quickly, but I mean in that in a good way.

So I would start with *Heating and Cooling*. You may for the fun discussion potential enjoy reading her book *Great With Child: Letters To A Young Mother*. Fennelly's a teacher at Ol' Miss, and this is the correspondence between her and one of her teachers who grew up and was pregnant and had questions, and so they started writing letters back and forth. And can you imagine writing letters back and forth to your old professor who is so good with words, who ... I mean, what a great friendship to have in your life. So you may feel a little bit jealous of that reading this book, but she does write about approaching parenthood, and Xoe's a daughter, you

may find this interesting and Rita is a mother, you may be able to say, yes, exactly or hold on, my experience was totally different. And then if you did want to wade your way into poetry after I hope falling in love with her writing in those two books, I'd begin with her first collection. It's called *Open House*. And there's a wide range of topics covered there. I do think as far as the beret, pipe, scarf that I'll fling over my chest with their nose in the air factor is concerned, I think you'll find her friendly. [XOE LAUGHS]

[00:46:35]

RITA: Sounds good.

ANNE: Okay, for our next selection. I really hope you both haven't read *Kindred* by Octavia Butler because I really would like to tell you about it.

XOE: It might be on my shelf, but I certainly have not read it yet.

RITA: I have read it, but go ahead. It's very good.

ANNE: This is a classic. It was published in 1979, but I just read it recently and I was so struck about how this could have been published yesterday. And I think it's perfect for you all because it combines fantasy and history and the emotional pull, things that you both really enjoy in a really powerful way. Also something that we didn't discuss, Xoe, but I had in mind as I was thinking about our conversations today is that you said that you don't have as much reading time as you have had in your past and that you wouldn't mind having a shorter book that you could drop in your bag and carry around with you so you could actually spend more time reading.

XOE: Right.

ANNE: Beth Ann Fennelly's works are short by their nature and *Kindred* also really packs a punch. It's just about 250 pages. You could sit down and read it in an afternoon or in chunks here and there and still finish it very quickly. And I think you'll want to because it has some amazing narrative drive. To understand why this has such emotional pull, I think it's helpful to know Butler's inspiration for writing the story. This was published in 1979 and at the time, Butler said that she was growing really frustrated with what she saw as young people and how they were interpreting the history of the United States and she said that she heard a lot of talk like, oh, well if I had been alive when slavery happened, I wouldn't have stood for that. Or I would have done better. She thought, oh, you just ... You know what happened, but you have no idea what that was actually like for those people.

RITA: Yeah, it really is one of those ones that plucks the cord. I mean, she gets into the bodies and the lies of the people in the book to make you really understand that you can't apply our standards to how they reacted because they were living in a complete - you know, the totality of their lives was completely different.

[00:48:38]

ANNE: Well what she said she wanted to do was very deliberately set her book in 1976 at the bicentennial where America is 200 years old, yet they're still dealing with racial problems from 200 years ago. Butler is well known as a science fiction novelist. This is not really a science fiction story. It is definitely fantasy, but it's also been called a fantasy novel for people who don't like fantasy novels. Now, Xoe, I don't know how you as a devoted fantasy reader feel about descriptions like that.

XOE: [LAUGHS] I think that fantasy is such a slippery category. I'm happy for anybody to read anything under that umbrella.

ANNE: I like to think that this book can be a way in for readers who don't think they want to read fantasy novels. Butler herself didn't like these labels because she said, ugh, you put a label on it? And people think oh, I don't want to read a book like that, even if they actually picked it up, they would really love this book. So I just want to say as far as books with universal appeal, this is a really powerful one. And it is one that uses time travel. The reason this is fantasy and not sci-fi is there's no time machine. There's no scientific explanation about how they went back in time. It's just a device to take this contemporary, modern, Black feminist in 1976 and suddenly throw her back over 200 years. She goes from 1976 Los Angeles to 1815 Maryland, on a slave plantation, and suddenly with fresh eyes, she's seeing before her the horrors of what a slave plantation was like in the antebellum South.

It's a really powerful device and Butler posted these reminders to herself like writers do in her workspace. She had one that read tell stories filled with facts, make people touch, and taste, and know, make people feel, feel, feel. I mean, Rita, I really hope that this touches the cord for you because she shares the facts and yet through her characters' eyes, she really makes you feel their weight, and I just can't believe that even though this was published 40 years ago, it still feels so fresh, so important. I get into trouble when I think, oh, reading that book will make me noble. Because then it becomes something like homework and then I miss out on a wonderful book for too long because of the story I told myself about it. But what Butler's writing about is headline news today, so now's a great time to read this book. And I really feel like not only is it a timely book, but ugh, it's just so good.

RITA: She's a great writer. I'll have to re-read it because it's been quite a while.

XOE: Yeah. You've got me fired up to read this one.

ANNE: There's so much to talk about. You can talk about the text itself and the relationships within it and her experience going back and forth in time because she does go back and forth in time repeatedly. There's so much to talk about in this story. But just how we individually connect

to the story, what the issues therein mean for our society today. I mean, you could have your own graduate seminar on this.

[00:51:30]

RITA: Yeah.

ANNE: Okay. We've done poetry, which is Xoe's niche. *Kindred*, also fantasy, but not a brand new book. For our third selection, well, we'll say our third author really. I'm thinking of Graham Greene. Specifically *The Third Man*. Is this a book you all have read?

RITA: I have not actually read that one.

ANNE: Have you read other works by Graham Greene?

RITA: Yes, in fact, gosh, I just read one recently. I can't remember the title of it. He's a wonderful writer. I don't think Xoe's ever read any Graham Greene.

ANNE: I was debating whether to go with his spiritual work or his ... He called them his entertainment, but if we wanted to go in his spiritual direction, I was wondering about *The End of The Affair* or *The Power And The Glory*.

RITA: I've read *The End of the Affair*, but I've never read *The Power And The Glory*.

ANNE: Okay. Well, here's what I like about *The Third Man* for you. First of all, it's short. It's 150 pages. Xoe, this is definitely one you could tuck into your bag.

XOE: Sounds good.

ANNE: It was first published in 1949. It has absolutely stood the test of time. There's a great film to go with it. And we know how you all feel about such things, which starred Orson Wells. So, classic upon classic, but there's potential here. This is a book that is fast paced, completely absorbing, it might be a stretch to say that it plays greatly into world history, but-

RITA: But it does give a picture of the post-World War II Germany and the black markets, all the forces that came into play when the lawlessness cracked in.

ANNE: Yes. You can definitely see this unfolding. I mean, even if you haven't seen the movie. This is the kind of book that you can see unfolding in your head like in black and white stills. It's set in post-war Vienna, pleasingly shady for this kind of mystery. Many readers have heard of Harry Lime without knowing why, but he invites an old friend who's a writer to join him in Vienna. He arrives just in time to go to his friend's funeral. This friend apparently died in an accident on the street, but of course, he believes that there is more to it than that. The writer's determined to clear his friend's name and starts an investigation of his own, which I know is the plot of many a

thriller, but it's really done great justice here and very succinctly. It's a small book. It really packs a punch and it's one of those ones that I think you'll be glad you read. And if you do like this, one of Greene's entertainments. Rita, you used the word spiritual quite a bit today and his other work could definitely be worth exploring, especially if you just read and enjoyed one of his books recently.

[00:54:03]

RITA: Wasn't he a convert to the Catholic church?

ANNE: He was and wrote with the zeal of a convert.

RITA: Yeah.

ANNE: So we talked about Beth Ann Fennelly, specifically *Heating and Cooling*, which I think would be a great place to jump in. *Kindred* by Octavia Butler, and *The Third Man* and others by Graham Greene. Of those three books, what do you think you all will read next?

RITA: What do you think, Xoe?

XOE: I'm going to propose that we pop over to the poetry bookstore that we talked about and see if they have any Beth Ann Fennelly there. [RITA LAUGHS] I have an Octavia Butler on my shelf and it might be *Kindred* and I might have to pick that up as my next, like post-*Wuthering Heights* book. Actually probably be a very interesting contrast.

RITA: Yeah. I would be into *Heating and Cooling*. I'd be into checking that out next and I like that idea of sorta the micro memoir.

ANNE: I love the idea of going from Cathy and Heathcliff to a contemporary, Los Angeles feminist. [RITA LAUGHS]

XOE: Right. [LAUGHS]

ANNE: Xoe, I hope this is your opportunity to get your mom to the poetry store. And Rita, I hope you're glad that you go.

XOE: She never regrets going to a bookstore. So it should be pretty easy to roll her out the door. [ALL ALUGH]

RITA: Where you go, I will follow. [LAUGHS] Poetry wise.

ANNE: [LAUGHS] Well thank you all so much for talking books with me today. This has been a pleasure.

RITA: Oh, thank you. We had such fun.

XOE: Yeah, it's been lovely to meet you, Anne.

[CHEERFUL OUTRO MUSIC]

[00:55:31]

ANNE: Hey readers, I hope you enjoyed my discussion with Rita and Xoe, and I'd love to hear what YOU think they should read next. That page is at whatshouldireadnextpodcast.com/192 and it's where you'll find the full list of titles we talked about today. If you'd like to hear more about their joint reading life, they chat about what they're reading together on their podcast FOIBLES. Find the link in the show notes, or by searching FOIBLES, F-O-I-B-L-E-S, in your favorite podcast app.

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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.