



WSIRN Episode 203: What happens in book club stays in book club
Hosted by Anne Bogel, with guest Emily Carter

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EMILY: You know, some people read it because it is fun and unbelievable, but so is science fiction. [BOTH LAUGH]

[CHEERFUL INTRO MUSIC]

Hey readers. I'm Anne Bogel, and this is What Should I Read Next? Episode 203.

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, I'd like to think we've all done it: dismissed a book out of hand because we didn't like the title. Or the cover. Or we didn't think we were that kind of reader. But have you ever written off an entire genre?

In today's episode, I talk with Emily Carter, a Florida reader who thought she was too smart to be reading certain kinds of books—and, as you'll hear, my own experience here was quite similar. But then Emily entered a season when she was busy and stressed, and she discovered that the genre she'd once categorically dismissed was, much to her surprise, full of books that were exactly what her lackluster reading life needed. As a fellow repentant book snob, I loved our conversation about what we miss out on as readers when we seal ourselves off from whole sections of the bookstore, how our misperceptions can be corrected by our fellow readers, and how we can take smart chances on books outside our readerly comfort zones.

Let's get to it!

Emily, welcome to the show.

[00:01:33]

EMILY: Thanks, Anne. I'm really excited to talk to you this morning.

ANNE: We were all at What Should I Read Next headquarters very excited to get your submission from our guest submission form because you brought up a topic that you mentioned you hadn't heard about on the show yet.

EMILY: Yeah, so, I have been listening for a while and I had never really heard you talk too much, other than maybe some people will bring up an individual book, about romance novels. I haven't been reading romance for a long time, like, I thought a lot of people who really love the genre sorta grew up with it. I had a stereotype in my head, I think like a lot of people did, about who reads romance novels and what they are. And then when I found them, it's just been a genre that has helped me get back into loving reading. Also was the right kind of book I needed at the right time in my life. So I'm excited to talk about that, and talk about the books I liked.

ANNE: Okay, first of all, I have to say that when it comes to romance and some other genres as well, but when it comes to romance, I am a repentant book snob. Just in the past few years, I have a lot of friends who have gotten into romance, and when they did, at first I kinda raised my eyebrows and went, reeaally? And then they lovingly but firmly pointed out to me that you can't just write off a whole genre, and they are very talented authors writing all different kinds of books. And to like dismiss a whole genre as not being serious literature was really snobby, and also really sexist. And I think I thought as a woman, I wouldn't be discounting women just because they're writing what they are, but yeah, I totally was. So I'm glad you're here today. We can all make amends.

EMILY: Yes. I like how you put that as sorta a repentant book snob because I think I just thought I'm better than that novel, and I had an idea about sorta the housewife who sits and reads romance novels because she's missing something in her life a little bit and the covers probably didn't help until now I kinda learned to love that. Most people who read romance and the community of women who love romance novels kinda cherish those covers. [BOTH LAUGH]

ANNE: So now you're leaning in instead of like running away or apologizing.

EMILY: Exactly. Exactly. I think like every genre of book, you get all kinds and you get more serious novels and you know, some people read it because it is fun and unbelievable, but so is science fiction. A lot of different genres — fiction, fantasy — that people read. For me, what got me started reading romance novels was because I heard one of my other favorite podcasts Pop Culture Happy Hour from NPR-

ANNE: Yeah.

[00:03:58]

EMILY: A couple summers ago, they did a whole romance novel episode. I got great recommendations and four women talking about why they love these books and how much fun they are. And I kinda went, NPR is promoting romance novels. Like maybe these are some fun things I should check out. So then I followed a couple of blogs and kinda was surprised at not just the women who read romance, but the female authors who write romance come from all kinds of literary and other professional backgrounds. I mean, I know one of the authors I love is Courtney Milan, and she was a lawyer. I think she was a property lawyer. [BOTH LAUGH]

ANNE: Hey, my background's in property law. I've never read Courtney Milan, though. At least not yet.

EMILY: Eloisa James is another name who comes up. She's a Shakespeare professor. All kinds of women really support the genre and love what it says about writing to women and writing for women, so I love that.

ANNE: So, Emily, you heard that NPR piece and then what happened next?

EMILY: The guests on there was Sarah Wendell, who runs a book blog about romance novels. So I kinda followed up with the recommendations that they kinda had, and at the time in my life when I listened to it, I was working at a really stressful job. 10, 11-hour days. I have four kids. They were all very young at the time. It was just very stressful. I wanted an escape, and I wanted something that ... I don't want to say totally turned my brain off because I also don't like that people are like oh, I just read a romance novel 'cause it's so light and easy that I don't have to think about it because I found that wasn't always true.

ANNE: Right.

EMILY: But what I did find that I loved was that you know that there's going to be a happy ending and at that time, and since then with so many other things going on in our world and in our country and all of that, knowing that you're going to see a female character go through trials, learn about herself, often kinda overcome adversity to have a happy ending, was just so important. I really embraced that part of it. Along with the fact that then kinda following some different blogs, GoodReads authors and things like that, that the women who write and read romance really support each other. Like it always seems to be really safe place to talk about lots of different things and what women are going through and how we feel about things going on in the world right now. That community around it was so important to me then and that's kinda what kept me reading romance for the last couple of years since then and getting more involved in it as a genre.

ANNE: Yes. And I just want to underline a couple things you said which is romance novels by definition, they end with a happy ever after or a happy for now. Like sometimes people will call like Nicholas Sparks or maybe for you romance novels, those are not romance novels.

[00:06:45]

EMILY: Right. Like I never read a Nicholas Sparks novel because if I want to cry in a book, I want a happy cry in a book. I want to know that happy ending is coming. And that's kinda the main thing with romance novel is that the love story is the central plot. There's usually a lot of adversity that the heroine has to overcome to get there, but that is the overarching story and then at the end, you know it's optimistic and feels satisfying for your heroine. There maybe other unresolved issues in the background, especially because a lot of romance novels are series. You know, something may have been unresolved with a side character, you know, you can often tell like who they're maybe setting up the next book to be about because [BOTH LAUGH] you know, she had a little side story for a couple of chapters and you're like, you know, what happened to her younger sister? But for your main heroine and your hero, you know you're going to have a happy ending and I love that. And I think that's something that is were the stigma came in, is like well there's no drama there, you know what's going to happen. I think that's true in a lot of genre fiction. I mean, you hit certain plot beats because that is why you're reading it, whether it's fantasy or science fiction or whatever, that is what makes it comforting, that doesn't take it away from being good literature either, being a good book.

ANNE: Right and some of my very favorite literary novels begin with the end. I mean, you find out on page one that something has ended in disaster, whether that's for a culture or a life, and then you read to find out why and how.

EMILY: Right.

ANNE: I also really related to something you said about how it wasn't until you heard romance novels being discussed on NPR that you thought oh, those books could be for me. And it's not that there's anything magic about NPR in this situation, but what is magic and on the other hand, what I think can be so detrimental to readers, is to seal ourselves off from a whole category of books and reading in this case, but we do it in other areas of our lives. We just assume, oh, that's not for me. Those people are like this. I am like that, and we miss out on something really good. I was having a conversation, I think actually with my husband, Will. I think I was showing him another like link I found on the Internet about what's so great about romance novels or why the stereotypes about the genre hurt women so much, and he's like, you're like soapboxing about this, like what's the deal here? I was like, it's not just that I feel so strongly about romance, but like this is my area of repentance, where I have seen, how I was at ... Like I said before, I was a total snob. I just categorically assumed this is not for me and just didn't even investigate it, and I feel like when we do that in any area of our lives, we know just enough to be inoculated.

EMILY: Hearing myself say it back, I'm like, oh, yeah, that makes me sound kinda like a snob, that I'm like oh, yeah, it was NPR of all like things [BOTH LAUGH] that made me-

[00:09:29]

ANNE: Well it could have been anything, but it caused you to take a second look and reevaluate your own attitude.

EMILY: Right. Absolutely. And one of the things that I thought about leading up to this conversation with you and thinking about I've seen romance come up and be discussed more often in the last year, maybe partly because yes, once you open yourself up to that, then you see it everywhere and it's like suddenly when you learn something, you're like how did I never know this cause it comes up in my life all over the place. So I've noticed that now that I see it ... Romance, every time I see a piece about it somewhere, they talk about how this is a billion dollar book industry. I mean, it's always been one of the most successful genres and one of the things that I think closed people off to it was we talked about like the covers. I mean, there is a thing about judging the bodice ripper, I mean, that's where they get the term from back in the day. [ANNE LAUGHS]

And I've noticed a lot especially contemporary romance novels that are getting published are going with the more hand drawn covers. Like I just read *Evie Drake Starts Over* by Linda Holmes, who does the NPR Pop Culture Happy Hour podcast. It's really ... I mean, it's a contemporary romance. It's a small-town romance. It was great about starting over after her husband has passed away and falling in love with a big city baseball player. I mean, it's very similar to what's been done before sorta in those romances before. It looks like what I think a lot of the YA covers are looking like now, which I love, where it's much more stylized, I guess. And I think that's getting people to pick up the books 'cause I keep seeing things like *The Kiss Quotient* and *The Bride Test* by Helen Hoang, both of which I read and loved, have seen on a lot of lists of people who said, I didn't think I'd like romance novels, and then I picked this up. Because no one is looking at you with a side eye if you buy it at the bookstore and stuff, which is unfortunate that that ever happens at all, but it does. I like that they're kinda finding a way to get more people to read the genre even if it is just that little bit of cover change.

ANNE: And something I've found is that readers love discovering a book that they never would have thought was for them. You know, something that really takes them by surprise and something they never would have picked up on their own, but a trusted source recommended it and overcame the are you serious, for me? objection and then they ended up loving it, and I feel like so many people — they could feel that way about romance novels or maybe, maybe you're listening and you're a romance fan, but you know, like you would never touch science fiction or literary fiction or anything written for you know, teens or middle graders.

EMILY: Right.

ANNE: You know, just categorically think that's not for me, but maybe if you gave it a try, you'd be like, you know, like clutching that book to your heart and thinking, oh my gosh, I can't believe I almost missed this.

[00:12:06]

EMILY: For me, romance novels — yes, the main plot of a romance, the love story, is the thing. But it's not about this heroine needs a man or a woman 'cause I really like the fact, too, that a lot of romance novels, a lot of the ones that have been more talked about, are becoming a lot more diverse too. You know, I read some good, like, male/male romance novels and the main point of the story is the love story, but it's not that oh, she needs a man to complete her life. Usually to me, what I find so fulfilling is that the heroine finds the love story and sometimes even in spite of herself, because she's coming to love herself more. I mean, I think that's talked about, the feminist aspect of it. The romance comes to her because she's opening herself up to it because she's overcoming something else that's blocked her.

ANNE: Right. Right. Right. You can't have that external change in the relationships before you have the internal change in the character.

EMILY: Right, and that's what I found so satisfying was the growth that the characters went through for themselves, not to become somebody else for this guy, but for themselves to become who they knew they needed to be. Usually the best ones, the hero is there because he's the one who supported her the most. You know, he's the one that she finds was still there in the end, and that's incredibly satisfying.

ANNE: Okay, I have a recommendation for you and I can't wait to talk about it. But we will get there. But also, Emily, this isn't the only thing you read as you said, you have said that as a reader, you're up for trying just about anything or at least now you're up for anything.

EMILY: Reading romance really brought me back to remembering how much I always loved to read, like I know I heard other guests of yours say, you get into being married and you have kids and you have a job and it's just ... You know, you just don't pick up a book as often as you used to. Romance because they were books that were fulfilling what I needed at the time brought me back to how much I just plain love to read and how much I love having a real book in my hands. So yeah, I also read literary fiction. I've been trying to be open to more like science fiction and fantasy, historical fiction is still kinda my go to, that I find myself drawn to, but I would like to read more like historical biography. I find that I'm always really fascinated by stories about real people, but I gravitate to autobiography more like on audiobook and things like that. I want to read more historical biography because I read biographical fiction.

ANNE: So Ron Chernow, not Lin Manuel Miranda.

EMILY: Yeah! Something that's a better, real historical account that I know is going to be compelling.

ANNE: Gotcha. You're looking for a writer who can make history leap off the page in the same way that the novels you do enjoy.

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EMILY: That's exactly it. Yeah.

ANNE: So, Emily, knowing that you have broad reading taste, how did you choose three books you love today?

EMILY: One of my just all-time favorites, one book that I ... When I really stop to think about it, it's like my comfort read that I'll even just go back to passages because it makes me feel good and that I realized was something when I realized when I was reading romance before I knew I was a romance reader. [BOTH LAUGH] And then the last is kinda a cheat, which we'll go over because it's really a series, but I think that's fair when it comes to romance novels because that's really common. You know, you'll-you'll read ... they'll publish three or four, four or five books that all connect with inner connected to all the characters, so to me, it's taken it all.

ANNE: And you've fallen in love with the characters, and not just the one book.

EMILY: Right, exactly. And you're compelled, you know, if something's left hanging it's because you're compelled to kinda want to know what's going on in that world. Like I said, with a sister or with a best friend.

Readers, I know how hard it is to find the perfect book at the perfect time. And worse, how hard it is to convince my kids to read a book I think they'll enjoy. Sometimes what you need, what they need is a little serendipity. That's the cool thing about Literati. Literati is the subscription book club that makes it easy to find unique and interesting books for your kids. Every month Literati mails FIVE teacher-approved books all based around a theme. And the box comes with exclusive, original art and a personalized note just for your child.

My kids love getting mail, so of course they loved it when their Literati boxes arrived. The selections were a big hit, and included some books that they were curious about, and some that were completely new discoveries. And they thought the little extras were super cool. In fact, my daughter used the blacklight pen they sent immediately after she got it to do a book report presentation. She wrote the spoiler laden ending portion of her report with the pen so her classmates had to come use the blacklight to see the ending if they didn't mind the spoilers.

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ANNE: You know how this works. You get to tell me three books you love, one book you don't, and what you've been reading lately, and we will talk about what you should read next. Which was which — decode what you just said, what did you choose for your first favorite.

[00:17:38]

EMILY: Sure. [LAUGHS] So my first favorite is *The Bean Trees* by Barbara Kingsolver, which is just one of my all-time favorites. I first read it probably not long after it was published, so maybe it was in my early twenties. I love Kingsolver's writing because it's lyrical, but it's not deep, heavy writing. She just tells a really good story with really compelling characters, but there is a deeper message once you really pay attention to the book. *The Bean Trees* is a story of Taylor Greer. When she's a teenager, she decides she wants more for her life than she's gonna get in her small town in I think it's Kentucky, and she saves money, buys herself I think it's a Volkswagon Bug, and heads west until she gets to Arizona. Just trying to find more for her life. So kinda typical, now I'm realizing it, of sorta the heroines that I do enjoy in my novel - in my reading. And along the way, she stops at a small cafe and someone kinda just drops a baby in her lap. She finds out later it's almost like a two-year-old, like a toddler wrapped in a towel, and says this baby needs to be taken care of. And the rest of the book is really a story about motherhood. I love the way she puts together a story and I return to those characters when I just need a comfort read. Barbara Kingsolver's one of my favorite authors I go back to because of that book.

And then the second is *The Rose Garden* by Susanna Kearsley. Another one of my favorite authors who's probably one of the few authors I've read almost everything she's written. Everything new since this came out, I think I've read four or five of her books. And I read *The Winter Sea* which I think is the one more people might know. But then *The Rose Garden* again is just sorta my comfort read, in terms of I go back to certain scenes because it's just so evocative of the place and I love the love story in it. It's kinda borderline romance and women's fiction, maybe, but it also has ... I like the magical realism elements. There's a time travel element to it. The main heroine, she goes back to a small town, particularly a small estate, I guess it is, in Cornwall because her sister's passed away and this is where they used to spend the summers when they were young. Her sister's passed away, and so she's taking her sister's ashes to leave in them in this estate. And while she's there, she's also just a little bit lost because without her sister, she's not really sure what her place is because I think she was her assistant and her sister was a, is a famous actress and she did PR and she just feels a little bit lost without her there. So, while she is back visiting this estate, she finds that she kinda slips through time without warning, kinda an *Outlander* thing I guess. [LAUGHS]

She has no warning. Somehow she goes back there and she flips back and forth, learning about these dual time periods and living through both of them, she falls in love with the man who is living on the same estate but in the past. And it's just a novel of her again trying to find her sense of belonging and where she belongs and whether it's in this time or the past and it's got a great twist at the end that really made me gasp and tear up. And one of the reasons I like Susanna Kearsley is I do like the kind of magical realism element that she brings to her stories, the little bit of time travel, and the sense of history as well. So that's my second pick.

[00:21:02]

ANNE: And what did you choose for your final favorite?

EMILY: My final is *The Worth Saga*. So this is the one that's kinda a cheat because it is a series by Courtney Milan, but she also wrote a series called *The Brothers Sinister*, which is maybe more well known that I think more people think is her best series, but I really love *The Worth Saga*. There are two full-length novels right now, and I think three novellas that are part of it. For me, it's kinda an example of how romance is elevated above just the love story in each story. So for each one of the full length novels has been about two different sisters. It really as much about family and finding kinda how family ties stretch and change, but ultimately both of the sisters sorta find love in spite of themselves. What they're really looking for is the family bond and the family love. The hero in each story is there to give them a fuller sense of themselves, but it's really the love for family that brings them back. And Courtney Milan also just writes wonderful, witty banter and I would say that hers are not historical romances that you want to go for if you want Jane Austen like realism, you know? [BOTH LAUGH] I mean, I like that in my romance novel. I'm okay if the way they talk and the things that happen are not going to be period specific because women were not always treated very well in the regency period. Yeah, Courtney Milan is really one of my absolute favorite romance authors.

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

EMILY: So this one was a lot of people's favorite books of I think maybe two years ago and really I read it all the way through and it just did not sit well with me, and that is *Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine* by I think it's Gail Honeyman. And it's funny because I've seen this book on lists as it's funny, it's humorous, it's a romance, it's uplifting, and I did not have that feeling at all. When I was reading the book, have you read *Eleanor Oliphant*?

ANNE: I have.

EMILY: Okay. So when I was reading it, I got the sense that she ... Well because of her ... Because she's not comfortable around other people. What the author was trying to come across with is her loneliness read to me as sorta on the autism spectrum and I sorta thought that was where she was going. Come to find out, I read interviews with her since and she said that wasn't what she was intending to speak to. When you finish the novel, with the twist in the end, and you find out that it was sorta a self-imposed, self-preservation, and I just felt that she had a lot of

deeper issues going on that the end just wrapped up in too quick and neat of a bow and that just didn't sit well with me. Like I really felt it sorta didn't give enough gravitas to what she was really going through. It was more story there for her growth in the end that we just didn't get and I had just before that read *The Kiss Quotient* by Helen Hoang, it does feature a heroine who's on the autism spectrum, and it was done with such consideration and was such a lovely story that I just didn't see in *Eleanor Oliphant*. It just wrapped up too neatly and didn't feel like a happy ending to me.

[00:24:21]

ANNE: So, you feel like ending on an upnote doesn't make it an uplifting book because there's ... I mean, there's a lot of sorrow and trauma in that book.

EMILY: That's exactly it. Yeah.

ANNE: It also sounds like a serious case of expectations of not aligning with your reading experience.

EMILY: I think if I had expected for there to be more trauma then I would have approached it differently. Maybe read the ending differently, but I felt like there was maybe a whole another third of a book that needed more, you know? [LAUGHS] You know, needed to see her learn and grow more 'cause it was very little bit of an uplift after a pretty dark twist. I don't want to give it away for somebody who hasn't read it, but to me, that was a pretty dark twist at the end that really needed more time and consideration before the end of the book.

ANNE: It sounds like you felt like the author gave Eleanor her happy ending and just kinda erased all the sad stuff she's been to instead of truly showing her working through it and having that inner change that we talked about.

EMILY: Yes, that's exactly it, Anne, because when you said that I thought of something that I often see in people in criticisms of lots of books that I read but even especially in a romance, I don't feel like she earned it. After going through that trauma, I don't feel like it ended in a way that showed that she earned her happy ending for Eleanor.

ANNE: I mean, I enjoyed that book. I expected something harsh. I think I read it before it started being featured in all these articles about how like people want uplifting books these days, so they're reading Gail Honeyman.

EMILY: Yeah.

ANNE: What you're saying, Emily, has me, like, thinking back through my own reading experience because I know I said this before the moment in time when publishers started talking about how readers are really snatching up uplifting literature and this book was frequently

featured as one of those heartwarming, happy books. I think it's a sad book that ends on a strong note of hope.

[00:26:05]

EMILY: Yeah.

ANNE: But that's different than uplifting.

EMILY: ... Than uplifting, right. And again, kinda to get back to our romance novel, which I saw this on a couple of lists of like romance novels or in that section of the bookstore.

ANNE: Oh, that really surprises me.

EMILY: It has an uplift. It has a note of hope. But I don't feel like it's earned its happy ending.

ANNE: What are you reading now, Emily?

EMILY: I just finished last night *The Van Apfel Girls Are Gone* by ... Ooh, I don't remember the author's name.

ANNE: Felicity McLean. I'm looking at it.

EMILY: That was really fun. She's an Australian author, which I found out after I picked it up. I read a review of it that compared it to a cross between *The Virgin Suicides* meets *Picnic At Hanging Rock*.

ANNE: Ooh.

EMILY: I haven't read *The Virgin Suicides*, but I kinda have an idea of what that was about, and it's definitely a coming-of-age story. The story is told by a woman who, when she was 11 years old, in the early '90s, so it was very evocative of a certain time and place for me in my age at that time. [LAUGHS] The three sisters who lived across the street from her disappeared one night. And so it's-it's going back and forth between how she remembers it as a child, and then it flips to her in the present day going back to visit her sister and seeing what her sister remembers. It's a little bit mysterious like *Picnic At Hanging Rock*, in terms of you're not sure exactly whatever happened, you're not even sure what's going on in the background. That because you have an 11 year old, unreliable narrator, there's things you're seeing from a child's eyes that as an adult might be more disturbing. That was a really interesting read, and I'm still kinda pouring over that a little bit.

ANNE: Okay. That had been on my radar before it came out and I haven't talked to anyone who's actually read it.

[00:27:40]

EMILY: Yeah, and I read *Picnic At Hanging Rock* a couple months ago after hearing it on your show and I loved that.

ANNE: Well I read it after hearing about it on my show, too.

EMILY: Okay. [BOTH LAUGH]

ANNE: Readers recommended it and said I needed to read it, and I listened.

EMILY: Yeah, it was just the right kind of little bit eerie, a little bit off, you're not really sure what's going on to just the degree that I like.

ANNE: Okay. What are you looking for more in your reading life?

EMILY: I would like to read more short stories. I know I've heard you talk to people more recently about poetry and so I've been picking up different things, but I'd like to read more short stories. I've never been good about kinda knowing where to go and what to pick up there, but I'd love a good short story collection and as we talked about, I think a little bit earlier, biographies, historical biographies, but with a feminist slant a little bit.

ANNE: Well that sounds good. That sounds really exciting.

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ANNE: Let's take a look. You have loves not all over the place by any means, but then again, we only gave you three, so they are *The Beans Trees* by Barbara Kingsolver, *The Rose Garden* by Susanna Kearsley, and *The Worth Saga* by Courtney Milan.

EMILY: Yes.

[00:31:32]

ANNE: Not for you was *Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine* by Gail Honeyman. You just finished *The Van Apfel Girls Are Gone* by Felicity McLean. You're looking for a biography of a historical character, short stories, and can I just say good books?

EMILY: Good books, yeah.

ANNE: It looks like you enjoy stories of people finding their way, of making authentic, positive growth and change internally, and if it's also expressed externally, so that you have a novel that portrays what's happening in the character's hearts and minds, but also where you see them live that out in action, it also gives you a little more plot.

EMILY: Yes, definitely.

ANNE: That works for you and you've said that you enjoy seeing people find their sense of belonging and find a family if they don't have one and find strong relationships, or adding strong relationships in their lives and so we are going to look for books that show these things. But we're not going to look for very long because I really need you to read a book that's coming out on November 5th. It's a romance. You can talk about it with me and all your romance loving buddies. It is called *The Bromance Book Club*. It is by Lyssa Kay Adams. Do you know it?

EMILY: I do not. This sounds cool.

ANNE: Well you did say that you enjoyed *Evie Drake Starts Over* which features a major league baseball player who is suffering for who knows what ... I forget what they call it in the book. What's he suffering from?

EMILY: Oh. [LAUGHS] I'm not going to remember either.

ANNE: He's got like the shakes or something. He can't pitch.

EMILY: Right. He can pitch great in the backyard in the middle of the night when nobody's watching is what I remember from the book, but as soon as he's under pressure. [BOTH LAUGH]

ANNE: Which was a fine detail. Yeah, they're not sure if it's in his head or in his arm but it's not happening.

EMILY: Right.

ANNE: Okay. Well this book does not feature anyone having the shakes or whatever Linda Holmes called it, but it does feature a baseball player. So in this book, *The Bromance Book Club*, the cover is hand drawn and it is super adorable. Please look it up and take a look at it. It

begins with a Nashville Legends major league second baseman whose marriage is going down the toilet. I mean, he loves his wife desperately, but he's kinda been a jerk. He doesn't know he's been a jerk. That unfolds slowly over the course of the story, but you can guess. He's been a jerk. He ... [LAUGHS] Oh, I can't resist, like, borrowing the publisher's words. His marriage is major league trouble. [EMILY LAUGHS] So his friends find him living in squalor, in a hotel not because he can't afford better but because he feels like he deserves just something horrible. And he is unwell and unslept and has been drinking too much and eating too little and his friends pull him out of the toilet, like almost literally and are like, "Dude, you gotta get it together. Come over to our buddy's house. We're meeting in the basement tomorrow night." He shows up and the first thing they do is hand him one of these regency romance novels. [EMILY LAUGHS] With a woman in a sweeping dress on the cover, you know, standing against the field of barley or something. It's called something stereotypically regency romance-y like *Courting The Countess*, and he's like, I can't believe you're punking me when I am at this horrible place in my life. You're all like the worst and I'm leaving. And they're like, sit down, this is book club. [EMILY LAUGHS]

And the first rule about book club is what happens in book club stays in book club. And what he finds out is that all these guys in the basement, all his good friends, have gone through horrible times in their relationships but he didn't know it and book club saved their marriages. Gavin is like, she's so disappointed in me, I have no idea where to start. And his book club buddies are like, oh, we do.

[00:35:06]

EMILY: [LAUGHS] Right.

ANNE: All the guys are like, backstory! And he's like [LAUGHS] what? And his friends are like backstory is everything.

EMILY: Right.

ANNE: And they start explaining his marriage through the lens of a good novel. It's so much fun for readers. But what's extra fun, and the reason I really want you to read this book is because it goes like very meta about romance novels. Like he goes to book club and he's handed this regency romance and he's like, what is a regency? His buddy tells him, that means it's set in 18th or early 19th century England. And he's like, oh, great. That sounds relevant. So his friend says it is actually. Modern romance novelist use a patriarchal society of old British aristocracy to explore the gender-based limitations placed on women today in both the professional and personal spheres. [EMILY LAUGHS] And then he says, well there's lots of profanity, but he says, it is really freaking feminist. So it's so great.

Because they're dudes reading romance novels, Adams really plays with that and it really works. Like she has these little scenes, like the server at the diner where they're having their book club this one day sees a cover of what they're reading and she's like, oh my gosh, I love

that author, and they just don't want to talk about it. And one of them says, like, my wife does not read those novels. And the other guy is like, what do you think is on that Kindle, bro?

[00:36:21]

EMILY: Right.

ANNE: And they say things like don't be ashamed for liking them. That's stupid. Like the backlash against the pumpkin spice latte is a perfect example of how toxic masculinity permeates even the most mundane things in life because of masses of women like something, our society automatically begins to mock them just like romance novels.

EMILY: Yes! Yes. I love this. [LAUGHS]

ANNE: So I think you're really going to enjoy that. Okay, I have to say, I love this book. I thought it was adorable, but I know readers want to know that there is a whole lot of profanity here. It's a little open door. It's not super open door, but there is a lot of profanity.

EMILY: I know that's one thing we didn't talk about before, that I know always comes up with romance novels discussions is how open door, closed door and for me, I'm - I'm just all about a good story and all about a good arc for my character, but ... So that doesn't bother me at all, but I know ... It seems like a lot of the historicals I read are a lot more open door than [LAUGHS] some people are comfortable with.

ANNE: That's so interesting. [LAUGHS]

EMILY: Which is interesting, it's something about taking off the bodice and the corset and the whole thing I guess. [BOTH LAUGH] But for me, like, it doesn't turn me off at all, so.

ANNE: So it's a fun story in its own right, but the way she plays with what is a romance novel, why does it work, why are they popular, who's reading them, what does it tell us? You're going to find that really fun.

EMILY: Oh, I'm very excited for that 'cause that's - like - she put it better than I could in terms of what a historical romance novel works for me and what it says about like ... [BOTH LAUGH] That's awesome.

ANNE: It's so fun. November 5th. *The Bromance Book Club*. Lyssa Kay Adams.

EMILY: Got it on my GoodReads. [LAUGHS]

ANNE: That's the easy one. What are we going to do next? Okay, obviously, to a reader of your taste from *The Bromance Book Club*, there's no other way to go than like straight to John Adams. How does that sound?

[00:38:05]

EMILY: Okay. Yeah.

ANNE: So you were talking about biographies of historical characters. I think because of conversations I've been having in my life recently about Hamilton and truth and the way we understand history, how it changes, I went straight to David McCullough and his biography of John Adams called *John Adams* that came out in 2001. This biography changed the public's perception of how effective Adams was in his presidency, it raises significantly. And something I thought was really interesting is McCullough initially set out to write a joint biography of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson but as he dove more and more into the material, he thought oh, Jefferson has been on this pedestal for several hundred years, but I don't know that he can actually hold his own next to president number two. And once he started getting deeper and deeper into the research, his scope shifted and he began wondering, oh, I was worried Adams couldn't hold his own with Jefferson but I think it might actually be the other way around. So that's interesting. John Adams. David McCullough. Huge book. It's fascinating, but we're going to focus on the women.

John Adams' wife Abigail, speaking of holding your own, totally can in the company of these men. So she appears in McCullough's biography of Adams, but also Woody Holton gave her a book of her own about ten years ago and it is called *Abigail Adams*. Now people who don't always read biographies because they feel like I'm out of school. I don't need to do that anymore if they don't want to. Sometimes they call this interesting but dry, but I think you're going to find this really fascinating because Abigail Adams as a character was herself. It's been some time since I read this, but I remember thinking I didn't know a woman could be like this in Abigail Adams' time. She had a lot of power and independence in her society, but also in her marriage. Not just because she had it legally, but because she took it. Now this could be my own fault, but she really defied my expectations for what a woman could do in her time and I just really admired her.

Also just reading about the time itself was fascinating. There's an extended interlude about her and her husband's debate over whether he should be vaccinated for small pox. Reading details about that or about childbirth, and I think something that a lot of people don't know about her because she does get appended to her more famous husband is that she had her own family issues both those she took on with marriage and those she came from. I just think there's a lot here that you could really enjoy diving into. It's not as long as the McCullough. This is just under 500 pages, but it's meaty and well researched and there's a lot there to dig into. How does that sound?

EMILY: Yeah, that sounds kinda right up my alley.

ANNE: I hope you enjoy it. There are a few really interesting short story collections that spring to mind. Two are newer. As in they're coming out this fall. So one is the Zadie Smith collection. It's called *Grand Union*. These stories are all very different in tone. There's one that is wild about

Michael Jackson driving Liz Taylor and Richard Burton out from ground zero when the towers fall.

[00:41:12]

EMILY: Oh, wow. [LAUGHS]

ANNE: They're not all that out there. That collection is not for everyone, but there is something in this collection for almost every reader. And then Edwidge Danticat, the Haitian author who wrote *Claire of the Sea Light*, that I really enjoyed, she has a new collection just out on October 2019. Something interesting about this collection is all the stories seem to focus on character's decisions. Ones they did make, ones they didn't, and how that kinda hinged their lives. So that collection's called *Everything Inside*. It's new. It's by Edwidge Danticat. Given what you like for short stories, I just would like to really recommend a favorite of mine and that is *Interpreter of Maladies* by Jhumpa Lahiri.

EMILY: Oh, I've never read that but I know the name so well.

ANNE: These are also unconnected short stories. I'm just thinking specifically about Kingsolver and the way she paints a picture and goes straight to what characters are feeling, what Lahiri can do in these short little vignettes is, I think, something that you'll find really appealing as a reader. However sometimes what she's portraying is the way people in relationships just fall apart. This is not the one you go into excited for your happy ending. But the way she nails the way we are as people and, like, shows it to you a little bit removed is just really, really fascinating. And such good reading.

EMILY: That sounds great. I like the connection to Barbara Kingsolver because I just like the way she tells a story and you just are there with the characters, even in a story that doesn't seem deep, doesn't on the surface seem like there's big themes going on, but you really feel like you're there with them and it kinda sounds like this is similar.

ANNE: Yes, and her writing seems simple on the surface, and yet it has so much depth and nuance because that is her skill. Okay. So the books we talked about were *The Bromance Book Club* by Lyssa Kay Adams, out November 5th, not too far away; *Abigail Adams* by Woody Holton; and *Interpreter of Maladies* by Jhumpa Lahiri. Now of those three books, what do you want to read next?

EMILY: I'm going to pick up *Interpreter of Maladies* by Jhumpa Lahiri because it is an author that's kinda been on my radar. That just sounds so compelling and I like the idea of starting with one short story and then maybe also if I'm making a trip to the bookstore, getting the *Abigail Adams* book.

ANNE: Well I hope you enjoy it. And I definitely want to hear your thoughts on Lyssa Kay Adams like meta romance take after you read *The Bromance Book Club*.

[00:43:44]

EMILY: Yes, I'm really excited for that, so that's going to get pre-ordered I think, so ... [LAUGHS] Definitely.

ANNE: [LAUGHS] Emily, this has been a pleasure. Thank you so much for talking books with me today.

EMILY: Oh, you're welcome. Thank you for having me. I was so excited to talk about this, Anne, and do this with you. So thank you so much.

[CHEERFUL OUTRO MUSIC]

ANNE: Hey readers, I hope you enjoyed my discussion with Emily today, and I'd love to hear what YOU think she should read next. That page is at whatshouldireadnextpodcast.com/203 and it's where you'll find the full list of titles we talked about today.

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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.