



One Great Book: Volume III, Episode 6 *The Age of Miracles* by Karen Thompson Walker

[Show Notes](#)

[00:00]

One Great Book Volume III, Book 6: *The Age of Miracles*

[UPBEAT INTRO MUSIC]

Hey readers, I'm Anne Bogel, and you're listening to *One Great Book*, the short-form podcast from the team behind *What Should I Read Next?*, where each week I pull one stand-out selection off my personal bookshelves and tell you all about it in ten minutes or less.

[MUSIC]

Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.

That familiar poem is from Robert Frost. I couldn't resist reading it all, simply because that wouldn't have been legal until January 1st of this year, when his works entered the public domain.



[01:00]

And I can't think of a better introduction to the 2012 novel *The Age of Miracles*, by Karen Thompson Walker, in which she imagines a community on the brink of the end of the world. But it doesn't come in the form of fire, or ice, warming, or cooling, no meteor, no nuclear bomb, nothing that anyone had even known or thought to fear. "We didn't notice right away. We couldn't feel it," our narrator Julia tells us in the novel's first sentences. The earth's rotation had slowed—and that's what people called it, *the slowing*. And with it, the days had lengthened. By the time the news was made public, each day was a full fifty-six minutes longer than before.

At first, this change seemed benign. I mean, who *hasn't* said they could use an extra hour in their day? And in the slowing's early days, it's unclear what this change will mean for humanity. As Julia tells us, reflecting back on that time, "Later, I would come to think of those first days as the time when we learned as a species that we had worried over the wrong things: the hole in the ozone layer, the melting of the ice caps, West Nile and swine flu and killer bees. But I guess it never *is* what you worry over that comes to pass in the end. The real catastrophes are always different—unimagined, unprepared for, unknown."

The catastrophe was upon them, and yet—as they say—the world keeps spinning, albeit slowly here. Life goes on, and that means that in addition to dealing with the upheaval in her physical world, 11-year-old Julia must also deal with the upheaval that comes with adolescence: the loss of friendships, evolving relationships with her parents, and first love. That's hard for these fictional kids, but great for readers, because it turns out when you set a story of ordinary life against an extraordinary backdrop, what you get... is One. Great. Book.

[MUSIC]

Readers, while I've been re-reading the great books in this volume I've also been working on my next book Don't Overthink It. This book is more than a book about making good decisions, it offers a framework for making choices you'll be comfortable with, using an appropriate amount



of energy to do it, and generally freeing up your headspace to focus on all the other stuff that matters in life.

[03:13]

The book comes out March 3rd and right now we're putting together a few fun items for those who preorder the book.

You all keep telling me that the best part of the One Great Book bonus episodes we share on Patreon is that since they are all books that haven't been released you're able to request them from the library or preorder before everyone else. Preordering is a huge help to authors because that early interest shows publishers they should back the launch with advertising dollars, it signals to bookstores they should stock plenty of copies come release week, and it helps initial sales drive some buzz following the release.

Since all of those are true for me I want to say thank you by sharing a few goodies just for those of you who preorder.

You can order online or ask your local bookstore to order you a copy, then go to modernmrsdarcy.com/dont-overthink-it and simply enter your email address and order number so we can email you the bonuses when they're ready. Readers, thank you for your support. It means the world.

[MUSIC]

Before *The Age of Miracles*, Karen Thompson Walker had never written anything that broke the rules of reality, in any way. But when she read the news of how a 2004 earthquake in Indonesia briefly affected the rotation of the earth, changing the length of a single day by a fraction of a second, she began to imagine other possibilities: What if the change was drastic? What if the change was *permanent*? She began to play around with the idea, and wrote a short story in



which the days suddenly grow shorter: each new day is 23 hours, it's permanent, and people have to figure out how to deal with the change.

[04:45]

She subsequently set the story aside—she was plenty busy, working in book publishing—but a few years later she came back to it, and wondered if there wasn't a larger story that could be told here. What if the change wasn't fixed, and permanent, but ongoing—with the days growing ever longer—and worsening? That idea spurred the novel-length treatment readers hold in their hands today.

The Age of Miracles is the story of a global catastrophe, but Walker focuses her story on one young girl and her family, to give the novel an intimate feel. Julia is 11 when the story begins, but she's not narrating events in real time. Instead, she's an adult, looking back on her childhood, remembering what happened then, reflecting on the slowing with the wisdom that comes with perspective. This framing lends the story a doubly nostalgic feel: not only is Julia looking back on her childhood, she's looking back on life as it used to be.

[MUSIC]

There's something else about the framing here: Walker wanted to write about ordinary life, an ordinary childhood, a regular girl doing the regular work of growing up. And she discovered that the best way to explore ordinary life may be to create a premise that is anything but ordinary, that breaks the rules of reality in order to see that reality more clearly. In fact, Walker cites Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* as an inspiration—and if you haven't yet heard that episode of *One Great Book*, go back five episodes and give it a listen. By laying a regular coming-of-age story on top of a global crisis, Walker could write about ordinary life in a way that felt fresh and surprising. When the life you know feels suddenly uncertain, and may be about to disappear entirely, it gives it a poignancy and weight it did not have before, even though the actual events of your day-to-day life remain largely unchanged.

Walker noticed this herself, even though it was only her fictional world that was slowing, "As I wrote the book," she said, "I felt more and more thankful for uneventful days, for the reliable



rising and setting of the sun, and for the thousands of coincidences that allow human life to survive on earth at all.”

[06:49]

Walker has says much of her writing is driven by fear: she’s also the author of the 2019 book *The Dreamers*, about a contagion that nearly wipes out a small California town; she’s even given a TED talk on the subject of fear and imagination. As a writer, she has a very active imagination, and she’s learned that her fears are excellent raw material for creating great stories. Because what is fear, if not a story? “It’s a kind of unintentional storytelling that we are all born knowing how to do.” Our fears have characters, and plots, and vivid imagery, they feel suspenseful, and they focus our attention on a question that matters deeply to us. And so in this book, she confronts the end of the world with a spare set-up that allows a middle-of-the-night fear to be transformed it into a haunting *story*.

It’s a story, but it’s one our imaginations can accept, in part because it feels so very real. One of the reasons *The Age of Miracles* does work so well as story is that Walker keeps the science simple: the earth is slowing, and scientists are baffled in her book. To be certain she got the science correct Walker even had an astrophysicist review the book before publication, which she called “a nerve-racking but crucial experience.” In *The Age of Miracles*, the scientists can’t explain what’s happening, and they can’t change it; they can only observe that it happens. That’s not a terrible metaphor for growing up.

In short, if you like the sound of a haunting YA novel that’s a little bit science-fiction, a little bit coming-of-age, and that effectively probes ordinary life not in spite of its un-real backdrop but because of it, *The Age of Miracles* may be the next great book you’re looking for.

[MUSIC]

Readers, visit modernmrsdarcy.com/onegreatbook to learn more about *The Age of Miracles* and all of the great books from this podcast including *Never Let Me Go* that we talked about today. Now would be a great time to go back and listen to that earlier episode of *One Great Book*, again or for the first time.



[08:45]

If one book a week isn't enough, you can get a bonus episode by becoming a patron of the show. We want our patrons to be in the know so they can plan their reading, put in those preorders, or be the first on their library holds list.

Go to patreon.com/whatshouldireadnext to become a patron and get more great books. Now would be a great time to do it because this episode concludes volume three in this series. We will be back at a later date with more great books, but we hope our patreon community can tide you through with great bookish content.

Readers, I also want *you* to be in the know about my new book *Don't Overthink It* coming March 3rd. It's available for preorder wherever you get your books and we'll be having some preorder bonuses for those of you who do buy before release. Find out more at modernmrsdarcy.com/dont-overthink-it.

I'd love to hear what you think about *The Age of Miracles* on Twitter or Instagram. You can find me there @AnneBogel that's Anne with an E, B as in books, O-G-E-L or on Instagram @WhatShouldIReadNext.

Thanks to Kellen Pechacek for his sound design on *One Great Book*.

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.