



Season 4, Episode 19: Fabulous Stories + The Fictional Worlds We Want to Live In

Mon, 12/6 • 57:49

Meredith Monday Schwartz 00:10

Hey readers. Welcome to the Currently Reading podcast. We are bookish best friends who spend time every week talking about the books that we've read recently. And as you know, we never shy away from having strong opinions. So get ready.

Kaytee Cobb 00:23

We are light on the chitchat, heavy on the book talk, and our descriptions will always be spoiler free. We'll discuss our current reads up bookish deep dive, and then we'll press books into your hands.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 00:32

I'm Meredith Monday Schwartz, a mom of four and full time CEO living in Austin, Texas, and I may or may not be dating Amor Towles.

Kaytee Cobb 00:44

And I'm Kaytee Cobb, a homeschooling mom of four living in New Mexico and I love curling up in front of the fire with a great book. This is episode number 19 of season four and we're so glad you're here.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 00:55

Kaytee, I bet you're really excited to get my bookish moment of the week because you want to hear about my dating status, don't you?

Kaytee Cobb 00:59

I'm so excited. I'm so excited. Meredith I cannot wait.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 01:04

Alright, well, don't nobody should get too excited. There are no big announcements coming, only fantasy. But before we get to our bookish moments of the week, we want to tell you a couple of things. So our deep dive this week is going to be about fictional worlds that we would like to live in, which is a really interesting thing to think about. And I found myself doing a lot of daydreaming and preparing for this deep dive.

Kaytee Cobb 01:29

I think mine might change depending on the season. Like right now I kind of want a beachy fictional world because it's cold outside.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 01:36

Yeah. No, that's a good point. All right, well, so that's what we're gonna talk about in the deep dive. Before we get to bookish moments and the deep dive we are going to talk a little bit about our Currently Reading patron opportunity that we have for you. And there's a very particular thing this month because we only once a month talk about, we do a commercial for ourselves, right? And so this month, Kaytee, you wanted to throw some focus on one of the coolest thing, one of the coolest benefits of being a bookish friend. It's \$5 a month, you get a lot of content and a lot of good stuff. But this is the coolest.

Kaytee Cobb 02:11

Okay, this is the coolest Meredith and there are a lot of bookish friends who are pretty nerdy. A lot of people say one of their favorite things about being a patron is all the spreadsheets. I've got a big reading tracker spreadsheet. And we've got spreadsheets about every book we've ever mentioned on the show. All kinds of spreadsheets have been there. But we have enough nerdy bookish friends that one especially I want to highlight this week, because Kelly Holmes created what we are calling the book twinopoly spreadsheet. So it's like playing Monopoly, right? It's a never ending game. You go in she, she's magical. I don't know how she did this.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 02:45

Yeah, I tried to figure it out. And I can't figure it out.

Kaytee Cobb 02:49

No, she has some kind of magical formulas happening. You go in, you put your name and you put in some number between one and 10 of books you really really love, books that you did not like for whatever reason, and then you go to the next tab on the spreadsheet and select your name. And it says these are bookish friends that are your potential book twins. And it is astounding. It makes me so excited. First of all, because I love nerds and I love spreadsheets. And secondly, because we love that bookish friends are genuinely making friendships with each other. And, and she has made this like we didn't ask her to do this. She was just like, "I have an idea and I'm gonna execute it." And it's astounding. I love it so much.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 03:30

It's very, it's very cool. And one of the things not only do you find people who are your book twins, but also you realize that there might be a few books that all of those book twins have read and loved. And you're like, meaning to get to that those can rise up quicker and your TBR. So I've seen a lot of people say that that happened to them too. It's very, very cool. So for \$5 a month to recap, you guys are getting access to all of our additional content. Remember, we do All Things Murderful with Meredith. We do Kaytee Reads Too Much. We do our COVIDeos. And of course we do the Indie Press List on the first Thursday of every month. That is something all of us are always looking forward to. So you get all of that content, you get to be a part of the bookish friends Facebook group on, which is fantastic. And

then you also get a chance to find out who your book twins are in that group of over 1300 Currently Reading bookish friends so yeah, lots of good stuff for \$5 a month. It is a gongga deal and I am so grateful that so many people have joined us there and are having a ton of bookish fun.

Kaytee Cobb 04:36

It is delightful in every way. I'm so glad that we get to talk about something exciting in that group once a month or within the Patreon community because you know, Patreon also lets us keep our show ad free so this is the only time you guys get to hear us do an ad and it's just for us. We want you to come over and join us. So five bucks a month patreon.com/currentlyreadingpodcast come check it out.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 04:59

Perfect, so Mischief Managed, Kaytee. So now let's talk about our bookish moments of the week. What's yours this week?

Kaytee Cobb 05:08

All right, this week at our house, we did some winter prep. I did mention it's getting cold outside. We've had multiple days below freezing already. So we did stuff like emptying and refilling the hot tub, taking down the sunshade, because when it gets covered in snow, it tends to collapse. And that's no good, putting out away the outside seating. All of that prep also involves chopping and stacking wood. So my husband who is not a lumberjack, except in my dreams, he goes and he gets all this wood out. And he's chopping wood and we make a beautiful wood pile. And he sits there and he said, "I love having this so that we can have nice nights in front of the fire together in the wintertime." And in my head. I was saying, that's lovely because I love sitting in front of the fire that you make for me with my book. So it was like past Jason or current Jason saying, "Future Kaytee, I love you enough to make you this wood stack so that I can make you fires all winter long." And it makes me happy and it made my little romantic heart go pitter patter a little bit. So that was my bookish moment.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 06:10

I love that there is nothing like reading in front of a fire, especially a real crackling wood fire. That is yes. All the winter bookish moments. Okay. All right. Well, spoiler alert. I'm not actually dating Amor Towles. But I got I think as close as I'm going to get, except in my dreams this week with my bookish moment of the week. So you guys have heard me talk about Roxanna Kassam Kara, who is my buddy reading bestie. And so we have now we just celebrated one year of buddy reading together and it was her birthday. And so for her birthday, I decided that I wanted to get her a signed copy of A Gentleman in Moscow, which is our favorite book together that we've read in the past year. And so I did some Googling and found out that in fact, Amor Towles, because he is the treasure that he is, does, in fact, obviously he signs at book signings, but he goes in regularly to his own neighborhood bookshop, which is called Three Lives and Company, and he goes in there regularly, and signs books that people have ordered. And not only that, you can ask him to sign the book in in a bespoke way. Like, it's not just his name, you can have him do an inscription. And so that's what I did. And do you know, Kaytee that it does not cost any more to do this than just buying a regular book. I mean, I totally thought I was gonna have to pay a premium for this. And the bookstores like, "Nope, he doesn't. He just comes in, we let him know. He comes in. He signs it exactly how you want it. And then we mail it off." Three Lives and

Company in Greenwich Village is so amazing. They provided the best service. The guy who helped me is the manager of the store. And he was asking me questions about Roxanna and my buddy reading. And then I asked Amor to write to Roxanna to inscribe it, "Roxanna - Meredith and I agree that buddy reading is the best, Amor," you know. So he signed it that way, which Roxanna pointed out sounds like he's saying that he and I are a couple, which I really think that's how it sounds. And that's how I'm taking it. I'm taking it that that's what he means. But he can't say it to me directly.

Kaytee Cobb 08:25

Was that what you planned? Like, "Oh, if only Amor and I were a couple, he would probably write it like this?"

Meredith Monday Schwartz 08:33

No, I wish I had given it that much thought. But I didn't. But I didn't. So no, you know what it is? It's that I really I wanted him to write my name. And so I phrased it so that he would have to write my name in the inscription because I am that ego driven, even in my subconscious. So he did that and then the store manager called me and let me know that it was done. And that he said that he had related the story of Roxanna and I buddy reading and how we felt about *A Gentleman in Moscow* and *Rules of Civility*, that they had had this conversation about us that Amor had been so charmed by the fact that we do this right. And then he called me later to let me know that it had been shipped off and it was just the most amazing service and all they did was charged me for the actual book itself and then shipped like a little bit of shipping to Canada. This is the kind of thing that independent bookstores, by the way Three Lives has been around for four generations. They are an icon in New York City. The New York Times literally called them the perfect bookstore and the the bookstore of your dreams. The New York Times in 2019 wrote about this. And yet here's this guy providing this level of service to some schmo in Austin, Texas, right? Like I just I was blown away by it. So if you guys have any desire to purchase a bespoke Amor book, do it from Three Lives and Company because they deserve all the accolades in the world. Let's talk about our books that we've been reading recently. Kaytee, what's your first current read this week?

Kaytee Cobb 10:15

The book I want to talk about first is *Damnation Spring* by Ash Davidson, which is not a smiling and laughing book. So I'm going to go ahead and settle down now. So this book is beautiful and literary and has gorgeous writing. And despite all that, I've got some conflicting opinions. Are you surprised?

Meredith Monday Schwartz 10:37

No.

Kaytee Cobb 10:38

No. Okay. Okay, so let me tell you about it. We are going back to what could be called historical fiction, even though it's going to offend you because it takes place in 1977. And yet, that's kind of historical fiction at this point, right?

Meredith Monday Schwartz 10:52

But I was born already.

Kaytee Cobb 10:54

I know, I know. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. We're going to the Northern California coast, in a logging town that relies on the giant redwoods, where we meet Rich and Colleen. Rich is a tree topper like his grandfather and his father were before him. It's a dangerous job hundreds of feet in the air, and it's the job that killed both generations back in his family. His dad and his grandfather both died on the job. When he hears that one of the last tracts of virgin land with huge trees is up for sale, he secretly spends his and Colleen's savings to buy it. Colleen and Rich have only one child, whom they call "Chub." Which is fine but unfortunate. Colleen is desperate for another, but she keeps having miscarriage after miscarriage. She's pulled into a battle with a logging company, the same ones that sign Rich's paychecks, and their use of herbicides is really starting to bother her which of course they swear are safe. But things start to come to light. A little research is being done, a little poking around behind the scenes, it gets a little a little tricky here in the household of Rich and Colleen. Here's the good part. This novel truly is gorgeous. Ash Davidson takes us to the coast of the Pacific Northwest. She drops us in this logging town and surrounds us with rich dirt, springfed creeks and the smell of sap in the air, and sawdust on the ground. I learned more about logging and trees than I ever thought I would care to know. But not in a way that was painful or overwritten or like she she spent so much time learning about it, she had to shove all the facts down our throats, right? She just works it in beautifully into the story. You can tell she was born and raised in the area and has a real sense of the place and the time. Going to her about page on her website, brings this home and shows us she's writing the setting from a place of love. You can see pictures of her childhood and her parents and her grandparents all like around these huge redwood trees. What I had a hard time with and I feel like it can't just be me, is that I felt a little like maybe she hates her characters a little bit right? Page after page, I was sitting there thinking, "Good Lord can so and so just catch a break?" This is literary fiction, not middle grade fantasy so I wasn't expecting unicorns and rainbows. But by the end of the book, I was full on mad at Ash Davidson and wondering who hurt her as a child that she would do this to characters that she makes us fall in love with. It was really hard. It took me a long time to read. And part of that was because it was on my Kindle, which just takes me a long time to read. And part of that was because it was so difficult. I would have to like put it down and just be sad about Rich and Colleen and what they were going through. The situations, the conversations, the twists, and the plot did make me want to turn pages, but it also made me want to cry a little and not in that wonderful cathartic way that you guys know I love. It made me cry and frustration and upset instead. So while I can see why it's catching praise in a lot of circles, a lot of people really love this book, for me, it was more gloom than sunshine. And I only gave it three stars. So that was Damnation Spring by Ash Davidson.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 14:05

Now let me ask you this Kaytee, a lot of people know of my love for Greenwood. And so they've asked me if I have read this one because the apparently there are some similarities, but it's sounding like not a lot of the things that I loved about Greenwood would be found here.

Kaytee Cobb 14:21

No, you're not getting that same sweeping story that takes you generation through generation in this story. This is very, like a micro view of this family. A very specific moment in time, a very specific time in

history, a very specific place. They don't even leave maybe a 10 square mile area during the entire book. So it's not a lot of the things that you loved about Greenwood.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 14:46

Okay, good to know. Okay. Yeah. Oh, all right. Well, I'm bringing this week three five star books. The first of those three books is State of Terror by Hillary Rodham Clinton and Louise Penny. I don't think I have gotten as many DMS about any new release, as I have gotten asking me, did I read State of Terror? What did I think about State of Terror, obviously, because everyone knows my love for Louise Penny and her Three Pines series, right? No spoiler here, I just said this was a five star book for me, which I couldn't be more excited about. Because no one wants to be disappointed about a book written by their very favorite author. So here's the setup. What I'm going to do with this setup, and I thought a lot about this, this book is really badly set up on Amazon. And I mean, it's too long, it's too detailed. So I'm going to give you the first part of it, which kind of gets you into the story, alright, but then I've edited it way down, because I think if you go to Amazon and you read it, it's just too much. So this is the piece that you need to know. We're starting out our book in the very beginning months of a brand new administration. And this administration follows four years of a very controversial and tumultuous administration. Okay? Everyone knows exactly where we are here, right? So this new administration has just been sworn in. And it's a complete surprise, when the new president chooses a political enemy of his to be in the position of Secretary of State. So the President chooses Ellen Adams, she's our lead character, as his new Secretary of State. And as so there's all of this Sturm and Drang about the fact that he has made this choice because she has headed up a media company that has been very, not complimentary of him. So basically, he's taken this enemy and made her the head of state. Also, then, as the new president is addressing Congress for the first time, and Secretary Ellen Adams is there, a young Foreign Service officer, Anahita Dahir, is on the Pakistan desk at the State Department. And she receives a baffling text from an anonymous source. And she realizes a little bit too late that that message was a hastily coded warning. Okay, the Amazon setup goes on for four additional paragraphs, but I'm going to stop it right there. Because it's just too much. It's too much gobbledygook. This is a book about a best friendship between two badass women. And they basically need to save the world. That's what you need to know about this book. And that's what they should be saying about this book. But the setup is just all this blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, just open the book and start reading it. All right.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 17:49

Every single one of us who loves Louise Penny was nervous as heck going into a political thriller that she wrote, which is very different from Three Pines. And she wrote it with Hillary Clinton. If anybody doesn't know, Louise Penny and Hillary Clinton met each other just a couple of years ago. And they had that thing that is so magical when it happens. They met in their middle age and they became very, very close friends very, very quickly. They literally met at a book signing. And so they became super close friends. And then their publishers were like, "Well, what if you guys wrote a book together?" They each weren't sure it was going to be a good idea. And I sure as shooting wasn't sure that it was going to be a good idea. But having finished the book, I felt really silly for having doubted her at all. Because it was so clear from the very first page that Louise was the run, who wrote the book, and that the plot and the really authentic details about the political machinations and global politics were obviously squarely coming from Hillary. There was a ton of knowledge there. So their combined talents, were really more

than a sum of its parts, which made me extraordinarily happy. The writing, though, was pure Louise, and that was such a gift to me, because after *The Madness of Crowds*, I of course, was thinking it would be a full year until I read her writing again. The plotline of *State of Terror* was exciting. And by the end, my heart was literally pounding. In fact, for the second half of the book, I sat in one place and literally just pounded through the book, and it's a big like 500 page book. But I will say it's important to know a couple of things before you go into it. The first 50 pages of this book are a slow burn. I definitely felt it click at the 50 page mark. But until then, I was getting my bearings. And so I'm not going to say that it propelled me from the first page because it didn't, but I'm so glad that I hung in because the payoff was huge. It's a truly excellent political thriller. I will also say that there are absolutely politics in this book. The politics of Hillary Clinton and Louise Penny are baked into this book. If you despise Hillary Clinton, or if you love or even like the previous administration, this may not be the book for you. I just want to say that because I think it's really disingenuous if I leave that part out, right? Yes. So the other thing I want to say is that for people who are really big fans of Louise Penny, there's a really fun Easter egg in the book that you will smile when you get to, but it definitely if you haven't read her books, her *Three Pines* books, it won't affect your ability to love *State of Terror* at all. I am as always so glad that Louise Penny is in the world and writing for us, and that she has found a new friend to write with. They plan on writing a second in this series, and I am here for it in a major way. So this is *State of Terror* by Louise Penny and Hillary Rodham Clinton.

Kaytee Cobb 21:03

All right. My second book this week is called *The Accidental Apprentice* by Amanda Foody. This one is so much fun. I got an email from Netgalley about a sequel from this author, but we are not animals. So I went back and I found the first one. I was intrigued enough to say, "Huh, the cover is interesting. I like the title." I go see what this series is about. So I'm really glad I did. Barclay Thorne is our main character. He is middle grade. He's an apprentice to the town's mushroom farmer. Which is not an exciting job. But that's okay. Because Barclay is not looking for adventure. He's just hoping to someday become a mushroom farmer himself. That's all he wants out of life. And he'll get there if he works hard and he follows the rules. That's all he wants. No danger required. But then one day, as one does, Barclay accidentally strays into "The Woods" with a capital T and a capital W. And everyone knows you don't go into The Woods, because that's where you're going to find magical Beasts with a capital B. By accident, and to his horrified surprise, Barclay bonds with a magical Beast and is determined to break that bond because he doesn't want a Beast living inside his skin. In order to do that he has to journey to the mysterious town of Lore Keepers, where others who have bonded with Beasts share their powers and their knowledge. But of course, there's more adventure there than he ever wanted or bargain for. You guys, this is so fun. It is delightful from beginning to end. You can hear it in my voice it has me grinning from ear to ear from beginning to end. This is *Fantastic Beasts* meets *How to Train Your Dragon*. Other good reads reviewers have said it's like *Pokemon* meets *Harry Potter*, and I'm good with that. Also, the world building here is not intense, but it's wonderfully done, slowly peeling back the layers on the world of the Lore Keepers as we get to discover it with Barclay because he's just a normal kid. Right? So we both are entering the world together. As an orphan, yes, I did say your magic word Meredith, he's like a type one orphan, he's so great. Barclay has to find his own family. And you know, that tugs at my heartstrings. I'm so so thrilled that I picked up this first book in the series. Right now, it's the first in a series of four. Book two, as I mentioned already is coming out soon. It's coming out in

February of 2022. For now, you can pick up this first one and be excited about entering a new middle grade fantasy world together. It's *The Accidental Apprentice* by Amanda Foody.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 23:48

Well, you know I'm getting that one. That sounds fantastic. Oh, great. Love it. All right. My next book is also middle grade. And I also absolutely loved it from beginning to end. I want to talk about, oh, this book just has my heart. I want to talk about *Pony* by R.J. Palacio. Now, this was just recently a pick for our Indie Press List for November. And this was chosen for us by Page and Palette bookstore in Alabama and that that month's Indie Press List was absolutely incredible. This book was of the five Indie Press List books, one that I wasn't necessarily super drawn to so imagine my surprise when it has become one of my favorite books of the year. Alright. Here's the setup. Our story starts when our lead character 12 year old Silas is awoken in the dead of night by three very scary looking guys who arrive on horseback to take his father away. Silas is left scared and alone. Except he's not actually alone because he's with his ever present companion Mittenwool, who happens to be a ghost. When a pony shows up at his door, Silas makes the courageous or possibly foolhardy decision to leave his home because remember, Silas is only 12, to leave his home and to go try to find his father. So again, we have a 12 year old with a horse and a ghost going to try to get his dad back from three bad guys who took his dad at gunpoint. It's bleak. The beginning of this book is bleak. But it does not stay that way. Kaytee, I loved this book with the fire of 1000 suns. I love I love it that it was like a Western but it was middle grade. And it's historical but it felt like it was happening right now. Oh, I loved every page of this book. I was gasping and laughing and crying through every scene and I did cry in this book. I love Silas and Mittenwool. The ghost is worth the price of admission. He is I just love him with such a passion. It is historical fiction. As I said, though, R.J. Palacio says that she set this in a story that in many ways could be told from a lot of in a lot of times and in a lot of places. So the setting itself isn't the reason for the book. But I really really loved being in that particular setting in that particular time. The story really is a story about all kinds of love and how love connects us even after death, which I realize saying it out loud sound so boring and twee, but trust that this book is neither one of those things. It's a Western, but it's not. It's got horses and outlaws and lawmen in the American West. Its middle grade. It's got a 12 year old protagonist with abilities that do make him different. But it's got better pacing and writing than several novels of adult literary fiction that I've read recently. This is really quality writing, of course, R.J. Palacio wrote *Wonder*, which is was just a mega mega mega hit. So this woman knows what she's doing.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 27:12

So it's hard for me to tell you the exact genre that it is. But I know three things. But for the Indie Press List, and Anderson at Page and Palette, I would not have picked this book up. I know that for sure. I definitely want to press it into everyone's hands, because this is a book for everyone. Absolutely anyone from your eight year old son, to your 88 year old father could absolutely love this book. And I know that it's in my top 10 of the Year. I also know that someone somewhere allowed this book to be given a horrible title and a terrible cover. I think absolutely no one knows what to do with this book because it's called *Pony*, and it has a horse on the cover. And this is just not going to get most people to pick it up. I don't know who made those decisions. But I stand by the fact that those things are standing in the way of it getting the audience that it should get. I've been racking my brain since I read

the book to come up with a better and more accurate way to to sell Pony other than the name and the cover that it was given. And I think I've landed on it. I think it's best described as a more plot driven, violent, slightly supernatural Anne of Green Gables, right so instead of Gilbert in the school room, you have counterfeiters in a cave, instead of I'm so glad to live in a world with Octobers, you have a bog full of ghosts. Sure, there are differences, but the vibe is similar all the way through. There's that same sweetness, the same deep level of relationships between found family, the same search by a young child for a true home, a lot of the same themes that you find in Anne of Green Gables. And just like at the end of Anne of Green Gables, you don't want to leave that world or those characters behind. So this is Pony by R.J. Palacio, and if anyone is still looking for a gift book for Christmas, this is a surefire hit.

Kaytee Cobb 29:22

It is. I moved it straight to my children's shelf as soon as I finished it. So it didn't go in my giveaway pile like a lot of my books do. I will say one of my favorite things about this book that you didn't mention is the daguerreotypes, the photos at the beginning of each chapter, right which are historical. R.J. Palacio said she collects these and so these are genuine photos of we don't know who because they're lost to history and then they're included in the book and that even talking about them gives me chills because the way they weave into the story so I love that part.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 29:55

Thank you so much for saying that, Kaytee because I did I did leave that out and yet and as soon as you said that I was like, "Oh, that was one of my favorite parts of the story." It is slightly chilling. They do weave in there so perfectly placed. So much of this book they got right. But then they got the cover and the title wrong. It should have been called Mittenwool, and it should have had a better, more, this book's not supernatural, but then it has those elements. Yeah, oh, I just want to throttle whoever did that to this book, because it's not finding the audience that it should find.

Kaytee Cobb 30:32

Yeah, I agree. I agree. I think the the cover leads you astray. Unlike Pony who does not lead you astray.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 30:39

Right. Right. Exactly. All right. What's your third book, Kaytee?

Kaytee Cobb 30:44

All right, my third book is my favorite and probably going to be on my favorites of the year. So I had to put it in here as well. It's How the Word is Passed by Clint Smith. And what I have written in my notes is "Holy crap. I have to talk about this book." So I chose this one as the October buddy read with the currently reading bookish friends. About 20 of us discussed one chapter every other day. And then at the end of the month, about a dozen of us got on Zoom to talk about it. What a marvel this book is. And I've read a lot of anti-racism books and history books at this point, right? Clint Smith is a poet first. And you should know that before you pick this work up, because just like when you read a verse novel, and every word matters, that's what you find in these pages. It's not verse, it's not verse, but it feels like every word matters in here. I tandem read and listened to this one, which is my favorite way to take in nonfiction. So I had the paper book in front of me, and Clint Smith reading it to me in my ears. I love

nonfiction that way. And I recommend it that way. If you can find, you know, buy one copy and borrow the other is what I recommend. This is a portrait of the US and as the subtitle says it's a reckoning with the history of slavery across America. Clint starts in his hometown of New Orleans, and then travels across the United States and farther across the ocean, touring monuments and landmarks, visiting events and bringing us along for the ride. It's like a field trip right in his capable hands. We visit Monticello Plantation and Whitney Plantation, which take almost opposite stances on the way they explore the history of the slave owners and the slavery that was happening on these plantations. We visit Angola prison, which has embraced the prison industrial complex to the point of selling T shirts in the in the prison gift shop that say it's an exclusive gated community and you can buy these shirts like it's a cool thing to do to visit Angola prison, which infuriates me. We visit Blandford Cemetery where tens of thousands of Civil War Confederate soldiers are remembered in yearly ceremonies. And then on the flip side, he takes us to Galveston Island for a celebration of Juneteenth and the streets of Manhattan, including Central Park, where we can claim that the northerners were definitely on the right side of things, but only before we peel back the layers on what's lying underneath the city. This book is impeccably researched without being bogged down. But it's also really personal. Clint talks about his grandfather's grandfather being enslaved. We are not that far removed from this history. He includes personal stories from his grandma and his grandpa, including their own memories of Emmett Till, being lynched in the town next door to where they grew up. And they were alive at that time, and they remember it happening in real time. Smith strikes this balance between universal and historical, countered with personal and revelatory. I cannot recommend this book highly enough. It is stunning in every way, in every way. And I'm so glad to not only have read it, but to have gotten to discuss it with a group of women who are learning and unlearning and committed and growing together. It's How the Word is Passed by Clint Smith.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 34:03

I've heard so many people say that this is on their top books of the year list. That is just incredible. Incredible.

Kaytee Cobb 34:10

It's incredible.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 34:11

I'm going to get one more five star book in that I just finished. I just set it down and I just absolutely was gobsmailed by it. I want to talk about Master of Sorrows by Justin Travis Call. So I got this one from I just a couple weeks ago went to Fabled to buy books for my grandbaby. And of course while I was there, I had to get, you know, a couple of books for me. Jessica, one of their new employees came up to me and we were chatting and then she went and grabbed his book, it's YA fantasy, and handed it to me and first of all, it's got the most gorgeous cover. I mean, it's just this stunning cover. And then she told me a little bit about it and she looked me deep in the eyes, and I knew that this was going to be like this book meant something to her like, seriously. So I was like, "Give it to me for sure." And I picked it up very, very soon after coming home. I'm so glad I did, because I had never heard about this at all. But if you like fantasy, or YA fantasy, this is absolutely going to be one that you're going to want to pick up. So here's the setup. And again, all the theme in my books this week is books that are sort of hard to set

up or sold in a way that that I think gets in the way of what the book actually is. That's the theme of my three books. This one has a great hook. But I've got some hesitation about the hook and I'm going to tell you my hesitation. Okay, but I'm going to give it to you anyway, because I think it's important. Here's the hook. You've heard the story before. An orphaned boy raised by a wise old man comes to a fuller knowledge of his magic and uses that magic to fight the great evil threatening this world. But what if that hero were destined to become the new Dark Lord? That's great, right? That's a great setup. That's a fantastic hook. Now this next piece is complicated to set up. I'm going to try to do it really, really simply. And I'm only including really what you need to know here about this book. So stay with me. Our setting is the Academy of Chaenbalu, which has stood against magic for centuries. It's hidden from the world. And the academy trains its students to detect and retrieve magic artifacts, which then it hides from others to sort of keep everyone safe. Because the Academy and the people of Chaenbalu believe that magic is dangerous. In fact, anyone who has magic, or who has an ancestor who has magic is believed to be a part of the family tree of the most evil of all of their gods. Then you also need to know that of the academies, many students, only the most skilled can become avatars. Basically, these are the best trained thieves, and our lead character, Annev, wants to be an avatar. This is the only thing that poor Annev has ever wanted. He's been training for it his whole life. But Annev, as I'm sure you can guess, carries a secret. He possesses, of course, that forbidden magic that we discussed. He has a secret and violent heritage, which is very interesting, and an unknown deformity, which is also not okay, in this world. Our story really gets going then, as Annev begins to learn that dark forces are at work, and no one, especially the academies leadership, and maybe even his own mentor, are what they seem. And so the question is whether Annev, poor, good loyal do what's right Annev can survive what comes next, without losing himself entirely to his evil destiny.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 37:55

Oh, my gosh, I love this book. This book, you know how I said that State of Terror takes 50 pages to get into? This one takes five sentences to get into. You are in from the very, very beginning. It was so so so good. I do feel like the setup is a little bit misleading. Because this book feels very much like it's the start of a long series. We are not covering a lot of ground in time in this first book. So I feel like that hook that I told you at the very beginning, but what if he's the Dark Lord feel like it's there, and the series is going to deliver on that promise. But it ain't happening in the first book. And for that reason, I want to make sure people know that because I think when you set up that expectation, then as you're reading it, you're like, "Okay, but when's that gonna happen?" This book is about us getting to know Annev and he is a character that you want to get to know. I read this book, which is almost 600 pages over the course of just two days, which is definitely saying something for the amount of time I had to put into doing that, but I could not set it down. The arc of the story made me feel like I lived a lifetime in the course of those two days of reading. The journey that these characters go through in the course of the story is absolutely amazing. The characters we meet at the beginning are foundational, but they're so different by the time we leave them at the end of the book, that the story just has a really long sweep. But it only takes place the entire book only takes place over the course of three days. Which is really amazing for how much life you feel you've lived with these characters. I mean, you're like in it over these three days. I absolutely love Annev. He's a fantastic character. And this book, as I said, is laying the groundwork of who he is. His genesis story is what this book is. But if he's going to become anything like a dark lord, we only get a piece of that at the end of this book and I'm not upset about this

because that setup, that hook got me into the story. And then I spent the rest of the story being so sucked into his character and all the characters around him and what they were going to do and how they were going to do it, that I that I was so happy to be a part of this unfolding world. And there's also no question that this book feels like it's going to be part of a long series, because there is quite a bit of world building, especially the magic construct that it's building. That piece is complicated, and it takes time for it to develop. I felt like the story moved well, all the way through. But there's a level of satisfying complexity that I feel makes this something more than YA fantasy. I would actually but for the fact that our protagonist is 17, I actually would put this in fantasy, much more than YA fantasy. Again, there's a level of complexity here that's demanded of the reader power attention that's demanded of the reader that I feel, why doesn't really give it the right genre classification. This is the first book, in fact that I've read that I would almost compare to the world building of Lord of the Rings. Now, I don't read a lot of high fantasy. So I'm not sure how often that happens in that genre. But for me, this was the first book that I read that had those notes in it. I loved it from the start, and I didn't want to do anything but read this book for all of its 500 ish pages. But I was highly aware, the whole time of the fact that we are in a very male world here. There is very little there as far as female characters in any story of you know, of note of any kind. The female characters that are there are mostly there as love interests until the end. That didn't bother me. But I do think it's of note, and I think I should say that because in YA fantasy, I think we've become really used to having a lot of sort of powerful, badass women in our books. That's not happening here. This book does have that layer of complexity to the writing and the world building and the magical construct that's very, very different. I felt challenged the whole time. And I loved that. But I needed to stay on my readerly toes. And I need you guys to know that that's what this book will demand of you. I immediately ordered the second one in the series. I do also want to say there was some confusion about that, because even the author who contacted me through Instagram was confused because Amazon has the second one coming out in May of 2022. But Blackwell's has it right now. And then it turned out that Fabled has the second one right now. So the catalogs in all the publishing catalogs, there's a lot of confusion. Even Elizabeth at Fabled was like "I don't know what's happening." There's a lot of confusion here. But we have the second the second book in our hands in the store. So I immediately ordered it. I have got to find out what's going to happen next. Because I loved this book. So this is Master of Sorrows by Justin Travis Call.

Kaytee Cobb 43:10

You're in for the chunkers too huh? Because the second one is even bigger.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 43:16

Yeah, yeah, no, absolutely. I've been reading a lot of big books recently. And because the fact of the matter is, if a book is really, really good, it doesn't matter how long it is.

Kaytee Cobb 43:27

Right? Yes. And which is something that we have been talking about lately, like we've said, "Where are the editors," right? Because if it has that pizzazz to it, it's okay if it's long. But if you're sitting there wondering where the editor is, it's not okay if it's long, right? So exactly.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 43:45

And in both *State of Terror* and *Master of Sorrows*, in neither one of those was I sitting there going, "Gosh, when are we going to move to the next thing?" because both of those books were that satisfying blend of very plot driven, but also very character driven. So you're getting into, both of those books, you're getting into the minds of the characters, you're understanding why they're doing what they're doing, but there's a ton of actual action happening. And that is, that's just that's my sweet spot in my reading life when you can put both of those things together. Alright, Kaytee let's get in to our deep dive. And actually just talking about *Master of Sorrows* is a perfect way to get into it. Because when I was thinking about this deep dive fictional worlds that we'd like to live in I immediately realized I was very heavy on the fictional like the fantasy, like my YA fantasy love, is where I was immediately going. So what about you? When you first started thinking, what was the first fictional world that popped in your mind?

Kaytee Cobb 44:46

Actually, I kind of surprised myself, the very first one that I thought of was a cozy mystery. It's one of our favorites. *The Secret Book* and *Scone Society* is the very first fictional world that I want to live in, *Miracle Springs*, where you can walk into the bookshop and the owner knows exactly what book you need. And you can walk into the bakery and get a book pocket and it is exactly the flavor that you need. I just, there's something really delightful about that. I don't want to be murdered. So I don't want to live there and be a victim. But I would like to hang out with those ladies and be part of their, their secret book and scone society.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 45:21

I think that that's a really, really good one. And I hadn't thought about that as being a fictional world that I want to live in. I did of course, think about *Three Pines*, the *Louise Penny* series. That was very, very close to the top of my list. It is true that a lot of murder happens there, a lot more than you would think, given the bucolic setting. But to be able to go to *The Bistro* and go to *Mirna's* bookstore, and live in one of those cottages on the square. Like, as long as *Gamache* is there, even with all the murders, I would definitely love to live in *Three Pines*.

Kaytee Cobb 45:53

Yeah, just make sure he's your next door neighbor. You'll be safe. That's fine. Exactly right.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 45:59

Well, so what did you like, is it that coziness that you're looking for? Because I realized that a lot of books that we love, are places I do not want to live.

Kaytee Cobb 46:11

I made that list too.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 46:14

For sure. So what are the fictional worlds that you're like, "Yes, I want it to be cozy." What else?

Kaytee Cobb 46:22

Okay, well, I also I think this is probably going to be on your list too Meredith but I really want to live in the world of Nevermoor, where we can ride the Brolly Rail, and you just use your umbrella and you hook on to the train line to get to where you want to go. I love that. I love the multi level school, the Wondrous Society. And then another like cozy bookshop situation is Pages and Co. by Anna James. I like the idea of being able to get into my books, which is it's just embodying this deep dive. That's all that Pages and Co. is right? Tilly and the Book Wanderers, they're wandering through fictional worlds. That's exactly what we're talking about today. So basically, I want to be able to jump in and out. I don't want to stay in one.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 47:02

I think that's the thing, that fictional world that we want to live in is really different from wanting to just jump in, walk around and be able to get out whenever you wanted to. Right, because if that was the case, I would want to go to Hogwarts, but I don't want to live in the Harry Potter world, right? Like there's too much Sturm and Drang happening in that in that world.

Kaytee Cobb 47:24

Same with stuff like Amari and the Night Brothers. I would love to visit there. But Amari's got some stuff that she has to take care of there before I can go and hang out because I'm sure that's what's gonna happen. Like, she's the star. I need her to get that done before I'm willing to go check it out and hang out in her book. And then even The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe. I want to live in that book, but not at the beginning. I want to live in it at the end.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 47:48

Right. Right. Exactly. Narnia was definitely one of those worlds that I immediately thought about and so I was thinking about, I would love to live in Hobbiton. But I don't want to live in the other places that we go in The Hobbit or Lord of the Rings trilogy. There's a lot of places. I don't want to go to Mordor.

Kaytee Cobb 48:03

You don't wanna live in the spider cave?

Meredith Monday Schwartz 48:05

No, but just like keep me in Hobbiton. If you told me that I could live in the side of a hill with a round door and eat seven meals a day, I would be such a good hobbit. Your biggest problem is like what color do you paint your round door? I just I really I love that idea, but only in Hobbiton. I don't want to go in anywhere else. There's a lot about Elizabethan England, that I love that time period.

Kaytee Cobb 48:30

Except for the throwing sewage in the streets.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 48:33

and all the absolutely zilch medical care, right? You can't find a dentist to save your life. You know, for women there are you know, we don't want to be in Victorian England. We don't want to be in anything

Jane Austen wrote because although I love her books, but I don't want to be a woman we're all day., my entire job is to sit around making small talk all day long.

Kaytee Cobb 49:00

Don't forget piano and embroidery. That's the other thing you have to do.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 49:03

Oh, God so that, yeah no. But Emberfall from A Curse So Dark and Lonely.

Kaytee Cobb 49:10

So right, as long as Rhen is okay, right?

Meredith Monday Schwartz 49:14

Well, exactly.

Kaytee Cobb 49:15

As long as it's not the end of a cycle.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 49:16

Right. As long as he is healthy. He's in a healthy state. But I mean, there is a part of me that would love to live in a fairy tale. Right? So a cottage in the woods that has candy all over it. I mean, I realize in that scenario, I'm the witch. But I have this idea that like a fairy tale setting. I would wear dresses with a lot of brocade. I would ride horses, not sidesaddle. But, you know, these are the ideas that I have.

Kaytee Cobb 49:49

well similarly, I want to hang out with a lot of those characters. So like we just had A Spindle Splintered by Alix Harrow on the Indie Press List as well a couple months ago. I want to go to that world. I get to hang out with all the different fairytale iterations of Sleeping Beauty. Yes. Where she's actually awesome. Instead of only having 16 lines in her own movie. I think that'd be great. Right?

Meredith Monday Schwartz 50:11

Well, in that in that Alix Harrow's series, which is becoming a series I think is going to be really interesting because that's what we're seeing right? We're seeing these fairytale characters, but in different versions. The the sort of fantasy place that I landed on that I feel that I could live with with great safety and and just it would be wonderful is the Night Court from Sarah J. Maas's, A Court of Thorns and Roses, specifically the Night Court in A Court of Mist and Fury. I don't have to be with Rhysand because the Night Court is, you know, it's it's a wonderful, beautiful place. And I think that would be a great place to live.

Kaytee Cobb 50:54

I mean, in a time of peace. Again, there's there's just things I mean, there has to be a plot in a book, right? So there are things that happen in books that I'm like, "I don't want to have that happen to me,

ever." Right? That's true. I like the idea of the place you made just without all those other things happening.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 51:11

Okay, so we can go back and revisit Anne of Green Gables because what bad ever happens on Prince Edward Island?

Kaytee Cobb 51:17

Nothing. You just get drunk on raspberry cordial. And that is a great place to live. I'm going there.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 51:24

I think let's agree. Let's agree that that is our that's our fictional world we want to live in.

Kaytee Cobb 51:29

Yeah, I'm good with that. Although Prince Edward Island is a real place, isn't it?

Meredith Monday Schwartz 51:34

Well, it is. And I've heard that it's absolutely beautiful. So maybe we should go there. Maybe we should have a retreat there. I'll bet we can have a retreat in Prince Edward Island and everyone would love that.

Kaytee Cobb 51:46

People are going to be mad at us if we're not already planning this for 2022 by the time this episode releases. Everybody wants to go there.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 51:55

That would be great. All right. More. Yes. We will actively mull that idea. Okay. All right. So hopefully we've given you guys lots of things to think about. This is a game I like to play right before I go to sleep. If I have like my mind is wanting to chew on bad things. Instead, I will pick a fictional world and try to imagine actually living there. It's a great go to sleep game. All right, good. So Kaytee, let's press some books into listeners hands. What's your press for this week?

Kaytee Cobb 52:20

My press this week is a graphic novel. I've only pressed two before on the podcast. I went back and look and this is the third one. It's Good Talk by Mira Jacob. Good Talk is a book that I read in July of 2020. And I brought it to the podcast shortly thereafter. My Goodreads review only says everyone who said I'd love this is right. Nicely done friends. That's the whole review. That's all I wrote. But more than that, nicely done Mira Jacob. This is subtitled as "a memoir in conversations," and Mira really takes us through pivotal conversations in her life, and shows us what it's like to be a brown Indian woman in America, married to a white man, raising a biracial son, living with conservative in laws in the era of Trump, navigating New York City in the time after 9/11, exploring her identity with her friends as a teen and a young adult. It's it's so nuanced and multifaceted. Graphic novels are really often they're quick reads right, as you know, but it doesn't mean that this one is off the cuff or forgettable in any way. It's

done in a really innovative style of line drawings combined with photographs. And her drawings are instantly recognizable to me now, so I follow her on social media. And as soon as you see one of her posts, you're like, I don't even have to look at the caption. That's Mira Jacob, I know it because she's so singular in her drawings, right. But the best way to get to know her hands down style wise and human wise is through her book, which is why today I have to press it into your hands. It's Good Talk by Mira Jacob.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 53:54

All right, well, I want to add a book to the press list. It's very different from all the books that I've talked about today. This book definitely goes into more of the category of quiet, but is a book that I read many years ago and I still think about all the time and it's perfect for this time of year. So I really want to press Snow Falling on Cedars by David Guterson. Alright, here's the setup. San Pedro island north of Puget Sound is a place that is so isolated that basically if you live there, you can't afford for anybody to be your enemy. This place is really isolated. But in 1954, a local fisherman is found suspiciously drowned and a Japanese American named Kabuo Miyamoto is charged with his murder. In the course of the trial, it becomes clear that what is at stake is more than a man's guilt because on San Pedro, memory grows as thickly as the cedar trees. Memories of a charmed love affair between a white boy and a Japanese girl who grew up to become Kabuo's wife. Memories of land desired, paid for, and lost. Above all San Pedro is haunted by the memory of what happened to its Japanese residents during World War Two, when an entire community was sent into exile, while its neighbors watched. You guys, I read this book 25 years ago. My daughter was teeny tiny when I read it, I remember where I was, when I read it over the course of the days. I read it on a commute to San Francisco from Berkeley. So I was on BART and I was reading this book, and it is so fresh in my memory, because the writing in this book is absolutely incredible. It's so beautiful. Like I said, this book is not a barnburner. So if what you're in the mood for is something that's going to move quickly or be easy to read, this is not the time for that book. But if you're at that time of year where you're feeling like you want to get into a book that is going to be really really beautiful, take you to a place and a time that you probably don't know very much about and really opened your eyes to that time period in a way that you'll be really grateful for, this is definitely the book for you. Fun fact David Guterson is Ben Guterson, the author of Winterhouse who's one of my author faves, David is Ben's brother, which I find absolutely amazing that there could be two such amazing authors in the same family. Pick this book up if you want a cup of tea under a blanket with a fire crackling. You will never ever forget it. This is Snow Falling on Cedars by David Guterson. That is it for this week. As a reminder, here's where you can connect with us. You can find me, I'm Meredith at @Meredith.reads on Instagram.

Kaytee Cobb 56:46

And you can find me Kaytee at @notesonbookmarks on Instagram.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 56:50

Full show notes with the title of every book we mentioned in the episode and timestamps so you can zoom right to where we talked about it can be found on our website at currentlyreadingpodcast.com.

Kaytee Cobb 57:00

You can also follow the show at @currentlyreadingpodcast on Instagram or email us at currentlyreadingpodcast@gmail.com.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 57:07

And if you really want to help us and if you want to get more content, you can become a patron subscriber for just \$5 a month and you also can find your book twins. You can also help us by rating and reviewing us on Apple podcasts and shouting us out on social media. All of those things help us out so much and they help us find our perfect audience.

Kaytee Cobb 57:29

Bookish friends are the best friends. Everything you guys do is helping us grow and get closer to our goals. So thank you so much.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 57:37

Alright, until next week. Happy reading Kaytee.

Kaytee Cobb 57:39

Happy reading Meredith