



# Season 4, Episode 17: Books of Big Feels + So Many Thoughts on Matrix

Mon, 11/22 • 1:03:29

**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 will not shy away from having strong opinions. So you guys get yourself ready this week.

**Mindy Brouse 00:27**

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

**Meredith Monday Schwartz 00:38**

I'm Meredith Monday Schwartz, a mom of four and full time CEO living in Austin, Texas. And I really can be a little bit book bossy.

**Mindy Brouse 00:48**

And I'm Mindy Brouse, a homeschooling mom of seven hiking and reading in the mountains of New Mexico. And I'll read pretty much anything Meredith asks me to for the show. Those aren't tied together at all. This is episode number 17 of season four. And we're so glad you're here.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz 01:06**

Oh, Mindy. That's right. You and I have the biggest smiles on our faces. Because we have been, we always look forward to recording together. I was saying to you earlier this week, you and I talking about books, it brings out something really specific in me. And I just always look forward to it so much. So I want to tell everybody that the deep dive that we're going to do today, you're going to notice a theme. Because every time I do an episode with Mindy, when I see that coming up on our calendar, I'm always like, great because I have a particular book that I need to talk about. And for whatever reason, Mindy, you are just my favorite person to talk about, to get into really specific book talk with, like to deep dive on this specific book. So we're going to do that today. We're actually going to talk about, mainly we're going to talk about the brand new award winning book from one of my favorite authors Lauren Groff, the book that's called The Matrix. We're also going to touch a little bit on her other very divisive book, Fates and Furies. So get ready for that in the deep dive. Mindy and Meredith deep diving on specific books, this is what we do. But before that, let's talk about our bookish moments of the week. Mindy, what have you got?

**Mindy Brouse 02:24**

Alright, my bookish moment has actually taken place every weekday evening for the last two weeks or so. And it's when I look around during our family reading time in our living room, and my heart explodes like a million times, I can't believe no one's like, called my house and be like, "What is the firework thing going on?" Because I'm just like, exploding with joy. I feel so grateful. We got a little pushback when we announced we were all going to be reading for 20 minutes together in the living room every night. Because you know, 20 year olds and 18 year olds and 16 year olds are like, "You're not, I don't want you to be the boss me" and blah, blah, blah. "I don't want to sit down and read with you." But guess what, Meredith? Now our 20 year old and our 16 year old regularly ask me if it's time and they often are in the living room before I even get there and they're reading. Yeah, it's pretty much the very best bookish moment I can ask for just all of us quietly enjoying our books together. It's the very best.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz 03:25**

Well, my bookish moment of the week and I talked about a little bit on my story today on Instagram is that yesterday, I got to spend the day going to Waco. I got to see Elizabeth Barnhill who's such a good friend of mine and of course, the book buyer at Fabled. And then I got to spend some time at the shop, which I always look forward to. I got to meet more of the people who work at Fabled, which is so much fun. And then also, I got to make my first big purchase of my books for my grandbaby. We are building his library, I got to do that. And then I just bought too many books for myself. So tonight after we get done recording Mindy, I'm going to go do a book flight on those books. And I'm going to choose kind of the next one that I'm going to read. But that is the thing is whenever I go to Fabled, I just cannot leave that store without picking up books that I've really had my eye on or completely new, but I found a new or Jessica, one of their book buyers, put a new YA fantasy series in my hand, which of course is one of my absolute favorite things. I'd never heard of it, and yet, I'm so excited about it. So

**Mindy Brouse 04:32**

I was really hoping that was gonna be your bookish moment when I saw it on your stories today because of something I'm going to say later. So that's pretty great. I'm excited.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz 04:40**

Okay, good. Perfect. All right. Good. Well, as you and I were talking about before we hit record, we have a jam packed episode today. So we are going to get right to it. And we are going to start talking about our current reads. Mindy, what's your first one that you want to talk about today?

**Mindy Brouse 04:53**

Oh my gosh. Okay, Meredith, I am bringing my very first disappointment to the show. Okay. and it is a big one. And not only that, it ties into our last episode together when we talked about having a favorite author and not loving their new book. Oh, so you can probably guess cuz you know me, but it pains me. But I have to be honest and it's time for me to talk about The Devil's Advocate by Steve Cavanaugh. I know, I know. So let's do this. Alright, guys, The Devil's Advocate is the sixth book in the Eddie Flynn series, which if you are in the bookish friends group, you know, I'm a #EddieFlynnforever. We have Andy Dubois, a young Black man who was arrested for the murder of a white teen girl he worked with, Skylar Edwards, and he is now facing the death penalty. He and his mother who struggled to make

ends meet and provided defense on top of that are the only two people in this small town in Alabama who thinks he's innocent. The center of this story is a district attorney who loves killing via the electric chair. And Andy is his next victim. No matter what he's determined Andy will die. Now we know this from the start, because the cover says he's won every trial because he's behind every murder.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 06:13

Wait? What?

**Mindy Brouse** 06:16

Yeah. I mean, when I saw this, I was like, I'm gonna love this and then I even attended an author chat. Could not wait to pick this book up. I love the premise. Woven in is a sheriff and others in this system who had become entangled in the DA's quest. There's also a man who is a cultic Christian fanatic, who believes his goal of eliminating Black people is justified and holy. In comes Eddie Flynn and his team from New York to save the day against all odds. Then more murders start happening, and Andy's life looks like it will end in the electric chair. Now, in this book before I share how I felt about this book, and Mindy's flame throwing review, I want you to know we do have beautiful banter between Eddie and Bloch and Harry and Kate as usual. We have all come to love that in Eddie Flynn books. And there were twists I didn't see coming in the plot so those elements were still there. But Meredith, it is all strongly overshadowed by everything else in this book. If you want a book that is full of stereotypes then this book is the book for you. If you like books that inflame prejudices, peg Black characters as victims only, make all white people as blatant racists, frame religion as fanatic idiocy, and make the South out to have only people who can not think for themselves, all while actually doing nothing to help any kind of cause, well, this is a book for you. Here's the thing. I'm heartbroken. But I'm also pretty mad. Steve Cavanaugh had a beautiful goal, in my opinion. And we see that on the last page of the book and author's note. He wants to bring attention to a horrible truth that only five prosecutors are responsible for about 15% of death row convictions in America. Wow. And how these prosecutors have solved the death penalty no matter what. But instead of Steve doing that, and I say, Steve, because I felt like he was like one of my best friend authors, he makes the issue into some kind of creepy religious Klan motivation and brings up near ridiculous amounts of cheap jabs, in my opinion Meredith. This issue for this book is totally worth writing about. And I want a book on it now because it needs addressing. But how about somebody do it in a way that is going to help readers believe the struggle is real. And this issue is real. Instead of making it look like it's an outlandish cause by some really wacko people, because it's not going to motivate any discussions. Meredith, I had to phone a friend. I was like on the show. I was like, I have to phone a friend on this. Maybe I'm sensitive because I am a Southerner. And I'm going to call friends. So guess what? I sent the book to Elizabeth Robinson Barnhill and messaged her and said, "Elizabeth, can you read this for me?" because she's also an Eddie Flynn fan. "And then FaceTime with me." She's like, "Yes." So she read it. She started live tweeting me. And then we FaceTimed on my patio one evening, and she validated all my concerns about this book. Plus, she added a little bit more rage. So when you see her Instagram, you'll hear some more. She has graciously waited because she knew I was going to bring this to the show. Guys, here's the thing. I'm not a fan of disparaging an entire area or culture, any area or any culture. These are people so areas just aren't land and stores and businesses. They're people and people are complicated and nuanced. It's what I love most about S.A. Cosby, the author of Razorblade Tears. As a Southerner, I love that

book. I love it. He brings nuance. He brings complicated characters. He brings all kinds of levels to what we need to face and deal with and look at in the South. This book has high ratings right now Meredith so I'm probably in the minority here so far. But I wonder Meredith if it's because we're willing to overlook things when we love a series and we love an author. And I am scared that it's because many, many times we enjoy books that say ugly things that we believe without valuing the nuance and depth.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 10:31

I think that that is really what could potentially be going on here. I think that's a harsh truth.

**Mindy Brouse** 10:36

I think it is. And I think as readers, we can do that. Because it props up what we believe. It confirms things we believe, all of this. And we can all be guilty of preferring lashing out instead of challenging in respectful ways. Books can change minds though Meredith. They can equip us. They can empower us. And sadly, I think Steve stepped out of his lane. And he had an honorable goal. But he's from Ireland. And he wrote such a hard harsh book on the South after visiting there just for months, and he had an honorable goal, but instead he chose to take the easy way out and write to caricatures. Meredith, I really couldn't be more disappointed because I love Eddie. I still love Eddie. If you want some great Southern author reading by those who are seeking to bring honest looks, and yet real characters, and complicated and all the layers that are involved when you're dealing with people, then I do humbly suggest S.A. Cosby, and I reached out to him actually on Instagram and said, "Who would you recommend?" Because I felt like he does this so well. Who does he suggest? This is his list. David Joy, Brian Panowich, Laura Hightower, Alice Walker, Ernest J. Gaines and Deesha Philyaw. Y'all, we have to be brave readers. And we have to acknowledge when we want to take a path of least resistance because it's easy and fueling and not very hard. But on tough topics, I think we need to choose otherwise. So there you go, guys. That's my review of my heartbreaking heartbreaking read *The Devil's Advocate* by Steve Cavanaugh.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 12:25

Oh Mindy, I am so sorry. Legitimately sorry that not only were you disappointed, I know how much you love this series, but not only to be disappointed like that, like it's bad enough when a book is sort of like oh, I just didn't love it. But then when it actually upsets you for really valid reasons. And I think you did a really beautiful job laying out why this was such a tough read for you. And I think you're really really right. We cannot just be okay with caricatures and with gigantic stereotypes. There needs to be more nuance because books do change minds and I'm really sorry that this happened.

**Mindy Brouse** 13:09

So there you go. All right, I did it. Whoo got that off my chest..

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 13:14

Strong opinions but thoughtful. Strong and thoughtful, and that's exactly what we want to bring. I'm glad that you did that. Okay.

**Mindy Brouse** 13:21

All right. What's your first read?

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 13:23

My first read is a book called Lights Out in Lincolnwood by Geoff Rodkey. Have you heard of this one?

**Mindy Brouse** 13:30

I have not.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 13:31

So, here's the setup. It's Tuesday morning in Lincolnwood New Jersey and all four members of the Altman family, the family that we're following in this book are busy basically ignoring each other as they get ready to go to work and to school. We've got the dad Dan, he's a lawyer turn screenwriter and he's very preoccupied with problems that are happening at work. We've got 17 year old daughter Chloe, who is obsessed over, she's working on her college application essays. Her vape addicted little brother who's a freshman in high school is silently plotting revenge against a classmate. And then the MBA educated mom, Jen, she basically had a super successful business career, but then she gave it up to raise the kids. And so now basically everyday she counts the minutes until they all leave so she can start drinking. Mama's got a drinking problem. Okay, then, as the kids begin their school day and Dan rides a commuter train into Manhattan, the world comes to a sudden inexplicable stop. Lights, phones, laptops, cars, trains, the entire technological infrastructure of the 21st century quits working. Normal life as the Altmans and everyone else knows it comes to a screeching halt. So this is the story of how they navigate this major disruption to life as they knew it. Okay, all right. This book is interesting, on a couple of levels, for sure. First of all, the way that the book is written, both the narrative voice and the really, really short chapters make it an extraordinarily fast read, even though it's over 500 pages in length. So it just is one of those that goes down really, really easily. Did I like the book? I asked myself this question multiple times, did I like it? I did, in that it was an enjoyable and interesting way to spend a couple of hours. But it felt derivative in a lot of ways only because I had just when I read this, I had very recently read Leave the World Behind, which as you know, has a lot of those same themes. This book, however, was written in 2019. So there's no way that the plot of this book had anything to do with Leave the World Behind. I actually feel like it was some really bad luck for Geoff Rodkey that Leave the World Behind came out. And it's been such a juggernaut national book award winning hit. So I can't think that Rodkey was very happy about that. No, I guess the most accurate way to describe the book would be if one of those really venal self involved families that go voluntarily onto one of the Real Housewives franchises, if they experience kind of a massive natural disaster, like the one in the book, and you were a fly on the wall to watch them experiencing it. That's how this book felt. Because none of these people are likable. But you do find yourself wanting to find out how they're going to navigate this very strange and increasingly panicking situation. But nothing here is so outsized and crazy, that you won't be able to see like, the thing is you you can't let me put that in a different way. You can see yourself in how are these people navigating this because you have to kind of ask yourself, on my worst day, do I resemble some of these people in a little bit? And that was actually something that I thought Geoff Rodkey did really well. I know for sure, I wouldn't want to spend a long period of time without electricity with this particular group. But I do want to say that I continued to turn the pages and I really wanted to see what

was going to happen at the end. How this family was going to fare. Were they all going to survive? But it should be noted, if you did not like the ending in *Leave the World Behind*, you are not going to be satisfied with the ending here. I happen to like the ending in both books. So this is *Lights Out* in Lincolnwood by Geoff Rodkey.

**Mindy Brouse 17:35**

Well, that sounds right up your alley.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz 17:37**

It was interesting. Okay. All right. What's your next book?

**Mindy Brouse 17:41**

Alright, y'all. It's time for a crying book. My next current read is *The One Hundred Years of Lenni and Margot* by Marianne Cronin. Alright, so let's do this. This book takes place in a hospital in London in modern time. We immediately meet Lenni, a 17 year old girl who is dying and has more insight into life and death than any teen should have. But she is also using humor to help her deal with her situation. She's confined there, she doesn't get to leave. So her illness being she's gonna live the rest of her life in the hospital. She's sort of confronts slash interrogates the hospital chaplain, Father Arthur one day, and hits him with some most hilarious and awkward questions, forging a friendship between two very unlikely people. As Lenni navigates quite literally around the hospital, she stumbles into Margot, an 83 year old woman who is also dying. Their kindred friendship blooms in the art room as they decide to and then plan to share 100 years of life, their combined 17 and 83 years, by creating a painting that represents each have one year of their lives. As they paint, they talk. And they share their stories. We travel back in time with each of them, as they tell their stories for that particular year that they're painting about. It's not done in chronological order, because as Lenni and Margot share, they choose the year that comes to mind, and then they share. This book takes us to really unexpected places. Margot starts in Scotland as a teenager. We see her loves, we see her losses, we see her struggle to say yes to who she is. Lenni starts in Sweden, and it's just in just her 17 years she walks loss with her father and then herself and then Margot. We get to live two amazing lives in this book. One is way too short, and one is very long. Father Arthur, the hospital staff and others get to join Lenni and Margot some of the time, but we are really immersed in their kindredness. This book is about the stories of our lives that we don't ever tell others, the ones hidden in our hearts that we think maybe and most likely mean something only to us, or the ones we fear telling anyone else. It's about how death is scary but can show us how much we actually lived. If we take the time to sit down and share. Lenni needs a mom and Margot needs a child. This amazing book also reminds us that having fun, laughing, taking adventures and loving well brings us real life. This novel is not only about as we are living our lives, but as we open our lives to others and telling our stories. I could not love this book more. I think it could be a really brave read because not only is this sad, but I suspect it's going to prompt us to tell stories to others in our life. And that takes bravery. I do want to say that there's a trigger warning for child loss. I think it's done beautifully and powerfully as a part of Margot's story. But if that's something you don't want to read about, then I want I want you to know about it. So that is *The One Hundred Years of Lenni and Margot* by Marianne Cronin.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz 21:02**

Oh, you knew that you'd have to bring a crying book. I mean, and I've heard such great things about this book. Just over and over again, hearing people talk about how much they love it. So

**Mindy Brouse 21:14**

It's really different because it looks like it's going to be predictable, but it's just not and that just thrilled me. So it's very good.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz 21:21**

I love it. Good. Okay. All right. Well, I am continuing my love and devotion for Catherine Ryan Howard. I am on a quest to read her entire backlist. This is the third book of hers that I'm bringing to the show. And it's the third book that I have absolutely loved of hers. So she is batting 1000 here with Catherine Ryan Howard. This one is Distress Signals. Here's the setup. Her lead character is Adam Dunne and he is pretty sure he has finally found the right girlfriend in his girlfriend Sarah. But when Sarah fails to return from a business trip to Barcelona, his perfect life begins to fall apart. Days later in the mail he receives her passport, and a note that reads I'm sorry, - S. This obviously gets Adam completely freaked out and he decides that he's going to do whatever it takes to find her. He's puzzled when he after some sleuthing connects Sarah to a cruise ship called The Celebrate, and to a woman, Estelle, who disappeared from the same ship in eerily similar circumstances almost a year before. As Adam works to get answers, he realizes that Sarah was definitely not what she seemed. And he must try to outwit a predator who seems to have found the perfect hunting ground. Alright. Okay, I love Catherine Ryan Howard in the way that she constructs her books. As far as I'm concerned, there is no one better. This book, Distress Signals is nothing like The Nothing Man. It's nothing like 56 Days. And yet it is that really quality crime fiction that just has you turning the pages like you wouldn't believe. Normally, I get really nervous going all the way through an author's backlist. But in this case, like I said, she absolutely always hits it out of the park. I'm definitely not calling this book Distress Signals, a thriller. Okay, mostly because she lets us play along all the way through. This is another thing that I really like about her writing. She writes crime fiction, not thrillers, because she is planting the seeds all the way through. If you're smart enough, you can pick up the seeds that she's planting. The solution to the mystery was there the entire time, I didn't get it 100% until right at the end. And by that point, she was ready to spell it out for me. So also, I think that this book, all her books, but Distress Signals in particular circumvents the thriller moniker also, because she does such a good job building up her characters. We really understand them, their backstories. And most importantly, we understand their motivations for what they're going to do next, the story rotates between a few points of view, which I think done right keeps things really, really interesting. Every time it changed point of view, I couldn't wait to get back to the previous one. And that's a super sweet spot in my reading. This also is the second book I'm bringing this week with those super short chapters, which I think every book should have. The writing here is smart and the plot was satisfying, like complex. It's a mystery you can really sink your teeth into and you can really try to figure it out as you're reading. The most fascinating part was how much I learned about maritime law and that I already knew I didn't want to go on a cruise again, for several reasons, but not least of which is that you can be killed on a cruise ship, and there ain't much help coming for you. That being said I read this one in less than 24 hours. The pages practically turned themselves. You guys know Catherine Ryan Howard is an auto buy author for me. I just have two more books in her

backlist until I will have read her entire catalogue. And there aren't many authors I can say that about. So this is *Distress Signals* by Catherine Ryan Howard.

**Mindy Brouse** 25:22

That sounds good. I've only read *The Nothing Man*. So you may have just convinced me to pick this one up next.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 25:28

It's really really good. But like I said, I do not ever want to go on a cruise again.

**Mindy Brouse** 25:32

No, okay. All right. All right,

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 25:35

What's your third book?

**Mindy Brouse** 25:36

All right, my last current read is a bit of a backless book that I'm shaking my head for not finding on my own or sooner. This was published in 2018. We have *A Place for Us* by Fatima Farheen Mirza. Wow. So Meredith I low key have been looking and waiting for novel that makes me feel like *Parenthood* did, the TV show. And this book comes super, super close, I have mentioned before *The Most Fun We Ever Had* by Claire Lombardo. That brought me similar vibes. But this one is that without the sex or mean people. May also seem odd that I'm saying this when I tell you that this is centered on an Indian family who are strict Muslim. But it's true. It also made me think of another TV show *This Is Us*, and how it shows the messiness of adult children and family life. But it's also showing us moments from the different perspectives by the children and the parents, which I absolutely love in that show. This book does this very, very well. We have a cast of characters who become real and allow us to connect to them in many ways. An Indian wedding has a family coming together and we immediately know things are tense in there is some estrangement also. So we go back and forth in time as the wedding progresses, because the wedding is an all day affair. And we go back in time as moments happen. We've seen the lives of the family from when the parents, Rafiq and Layla married and then move to the US to the day of Hadia's wedding, their first child. Her marriage was not arranged, but is for love. And we can see that is a theme. So we journey back to learn about that, how that came to be. The youngest child and only son Amar is struggling to even be there and stay sober. The middle child Huda is trying to follow her sister's steps and also keep the peace. Each peek into the past is presented to us through different family members eyes, and their perspectives, feelings, beliefs, and, and this is my favorite part, misinterpretations. I cannot fully explain how this book reached me Meredith. It touched me as a mother to grandchildren and the misunderstandings and heartache and desire to do the best. I felt so seen by this book. But I also saw my kids really powerfully. I wondered if others like who weren't older or more parents would adore this book as much as I did. But then I remember that Liz Hein @lisisreading\_, one of my very best bookish friends, brought this to my attention and she adores it. She's a young woman with no kids. And we both love this novel. I got a lot of feedback on my Instagram post about it. So many people connect to this whether from a parents view or a grown child. I



really want to encourage the older parents, especially those of faith, any faith. Like I said, this one is about a Muslim family who are hoping to pass their faith on to their children, which is a sticky wicket. To read this book is a brave read, in my opinion, because it painfully and authentically reveals how our hearts can be misunderstood and misinterpreted. But it also shows the way to true connection with our children regardless where we each fall in our family on the spectrum in regards to our faith, so be a brave reader and pick this up. My very first press Meredith on Currently Reading was *The Chosen* by Chaim Potok in April 2019 when I met you the first time and this beautiful book brings me back to that full circle. I do want you to know there are trigger warnings for opioid addiction. This one is done very gently, like incredibly gently. But I do want you to know it's there. That is *A Place for Us* by Fatima Farheen Mirza.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz 29:32**

My third book is in the category of new a little bit newer releases than what we've been talking about. I read *Under the Whispering Door* by T.J. Klune. Now you'd read *House in the Cerulean Sea* right? You did okay, but you haven't read *Under the Whispering Door* yet. Okay. So this one has been sort of everywhere. So again, I'm just going to do a little bit of setup because you guys will you'll recognize it immediately. So when our story starts, we meet Wallace. He's really unpleasant workaholic guy who's pretty used to things going the way he wants them to go. But then, a Reaper comes to collect Wallace from his own funeral. And Wallace begins to suspect he might be dead. And then Hugo, the owner of a very peculiar tea shop, *Charon's Crossing*, has to convince Wallace that yes, he's really dead. And no, there's no manager he can talk to about reversing that situation. As this reality sets in for Wallace, he realizes that he's not ready to abandon the life he barely lived when he had the chance. So when he's given one week to crossover, he sets about living a life in just seven days. I am more surprised than anybody to say that I really, really loved this book. I loved *House in the Cerulean Sea*. So I'm not surprised about that. But the setup of this book was just a little too precious sounding for me, but I really like T.J. Klune's writing. So I jumped into it with some trust. And I think it was the right book at the right time for me. I think part of the key for me that I liked it too much was that I went into it with really low expectations. I really did like his first one and I had heard some mixed reviews about his second one. So I was proceeding very carefully. I definitely think as I said that this was the right book at the right time for me. If you're not in the mood for something that's emotional, and it's full of potential triggers, stabbing uncomfortably at your soft parts, this won't be the right book for you. But if you love books that do that, jump in with both feet, because you will find very good company here. It certainly is emotional. There is no getting around that. And again, for a lot of people they're like yes, but for readers like me, I just I want to be clear about that is definitely poignant. But I think that T.J. Klune's genius is in his pacing. He doesn't spend too much time in the maudlin, or the sad. He sort of takes us there and then takes us out and moves us on to something that's funny, or even a little bit scary. We don't just sit in the grief space for long periods. And I think for me, that's really important in me being able to enjoy books that have a lot of emotion in them. A lot of people will describe this book as a crying book. And in this case, while I didn't cry myself, I can certainly see why someone would. There were moments that I felt that tears were really close to the surface, but not in a bad way just in a way that can happen when you read a book that's a really well done story that also peels back your emotional layers. I love the world building here, exploring what after death might truly look like and be like, and smell like and taste like. And there's a lot of that element in this book. It's very evocative of the senses. And I love the cover, I

kept turning to look at it because it actually had a lot to do with the story. And I love it when a cover has real meaning in a story. And of course, I love the love story. T.J Klune, I'm realizing, does some of my favorite love stories. I just really, really just love the way that he does it. If I had to change anything, I would change the way that Wallace was at the very beginning fairly flat and one note. He was kind of an all or nothing Scroogie kind of character at the beginning. But I think that that's a really minor quibble, because as we get into the book, we watch his transformation. And it's very, very well done. Very believable, very organic. Overall, this was a real favorite of mine. And that is saying something for this hardhearted reader. So this is Under the Whispering Door by T.J. Klune.

**Mindy Brouse** 33:53

You may have just sold me on that one.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 33:56

Mindy, you would really like this book. This has got you written all over it in every way. Okay. Okay. All right, Mindy.

**Mindy Brouse** 34:08

Speaking of books that have Mindy written all over them, let's transition to ones that absolutely don't.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 34:13

Okay, let's give a little bit of backstory and a permission slip as I like to do when you and I, as I said in the top, when you and I talk, which we only do not even every two months, it's really maybe even every four months that we that you and I get to do this together. And for whatever reason it gets me in this mood of I want to talk about a specific book. I want Mindy to be my person because again, you bring specific things out in me when I talk about get deep into a book. And also I want to give the listeners a permission slip as we did with our last episode to skip this deep dive. Because we are going to talk about, we're spoiler free. We're not going to spoil anything for anything that we talk about. So that's not the issue here. But we are going to especially about Lauren Groff's new book Matrix. And if you can't stand because Lauren Groff is so divisive, I mean, people either love her or they don't, or they hate her. Or maybe Mindy, you will surprise me and you will feel in the middle. I don't know how you felt about these books. That's part of what I can't wait to talk about. But because of how divisive she is, I really want to give people a permission slip and say, feel free to look at the show notes and go right to the section where we press books.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 34:15

And I'm the opposite. "No, come listen."

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 34:33

I just want people to know that they have the option because there're gonna be a lot of people who were like, "No, this isn't a book for me." Normally, in our deep dives, we kind of, you know, we touch on a lot of different books, or a topic that's of much more general interest, which I love doing. But here today, we're gonna get a little more niche. So feel free if you want to go forward. But if you're still with us, let's start having this conversation. Okay. So I read Matrix. Now, I do love Lauren Groff. She is, for

me, a lot of what you were just saying, when you were talking about A Place for Us. When I read her books, I feel like they were written for me like she sat down, which, of course, is delusional, but that's how I feel, like she sat down and she was like, "How do I write a book that is going to speak straight line into the middle of Meredith Schwartz?" That's how her writing is to me. And, like, I'm tearing up not because I'm sad, but because she really just gets to my core. But when I heard the setup for this new book, Matrix, I was like, "I'm sorry, what? This sounds so boring." Okay. Let me give you the setup so that we can have our discussion everyone will know what we're talking about. All right, yeah. Okay. So cast out of the Royal Court of Eleanor of Aquitaine, deemed too coarse and just not suitable for marriage, 17 year old Marie de France is set sent to England to be the new prioress of an abbey. This abbey, you guys is not in good shape. At all. Its nuns are on the brink of starvation. They are dirty, cold and sick. At first taken aback by the horrible and surprising turn that her life has taken, remember, she was in the court of the Queen, Marie finds focus and love in life with her sisters at the abbey. Over time, we see Marie give up all the dreams that she once had for her life, and instead give herself over to this, to making the best of this circumstance. We watch Marie, who was born last in a long line of women, warriors, and crusaders, she is determined to chart a bold new course for the women she now leads and protects. So basically 17 year old goes to a crumbling abbey, and lives her life there. That's it. That's all we got going on. How the heck Mindy did this end up in my top 10 books of the year? Now. Tell me now, what you what...

**Mindy Brouse 38:19**

I have my suspicions on why I think it's yours.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz 38:22**

I want to hear that. I want to hear what you because I said to you, Mindy, I need you. You are my person to talk about books that are filling my heart up. Because you do these great conversations about books. I mean, I hope everyone's following you on Instagram, because one of the things that you do is you do these zoom conversations about really particular discussable books. And you lead them in a great way. So I hope everyone follow Mindy on Instagram and take part in those discussions. What did you think of Matrix? I asked you to read it, you didn't want to read it. This is not your style. This is nothing that you would normally pick up.

**Mindy Brouse 38:57**

This is definitely not something I would would have picked up and I loved hearing Marie's story, because I didn't realize for a while that it was based off a real medieval poet and that all of these things are conjecture, which I do like. I love that kind of stuff. Like how did she get there? Oh, I think you know, Lauren Groff's like, "I think I'm gonna put her in a nunnery." Okay. I actually really liked parts of this book. But in general, it's not something I'd probably hand off to people. But Meredith, I can see you in this book in so many different ways. Tell me this. Why do you love her as a character so much?

**Meredith Monday Schwartz 39:41**

I think there were two parts of it because I thought a lot about this. Did I love the book? Did I love Marie as a character? Both. I think at the end of the day that it was both. I know that as I started reading the book itself, I found myself reading a few paragraphs and needing to like stop and take deep breath.

Because I just feel like Lauren Groff's writing is so incredible that I just have to go like, Oh, whoa, I mean, she just, oh, she's just the best pure writer to me, I just the way that she just puts you into people's heads just absolutely blows me away. I found that also be to be true with Fates and Furies. I think that this is, you're just inside the center of these characters' heads. So I definitely think her writing was what got me into the setting of this 12th century abbey. And once I was there, I was completely I almost feel like I had been dropped in and like, the lid went above my head. And I was just I read this almost in just it's only 300 pages, I read this almost in a single sitting, because I felt like I had been dropped into one of those sensory deprivation chambers, like I was just in this story. And to a certain extent, the abbey itself feels a little like that, too, right? It's a very eyes closed environment, we don't go anywhere else. It's just that's all that that's the only place that we were in the lead character, Marie, she's just one that became so real to me. She was such a fully fleshed out person. She was as a character she was sort of described as being large, tall and homely, and yet, absolutely filled with great power and charisma that people around her couldn't ignore, even at 17 years old. I think that what I loved is that that's what this book is actually about. It's about a life, a very particular life, lived at a very particular time, in a very particular place. And I also feel like this book is very much about women, the way that we have our power taken away from us. And the way that we can take it back. Even in the 12th century, Marie was doing a lot of things, not like going to war kind of taking. But in the daily, she decided to take her power back. She was such a, she decided what she was going to make of this life. And I really, really, really liked that.

**Mindy Brouse** 42:33

And that is why I think this book spoke to you. And I kept thinking of you because of course I was reading it for you. But I think the journey that Marie takes from being a 17 year old, who's actually a little bit obsessing on somebody else that I won't say who and gets shoved out and sent to a nunnery and she kind of is like "I'm going to get out of here soon and I have a plan to go back to the person that I'm obsessing on." And the transition she makes in this book, from that young person who was still influential, even in her obsessions, and how she spoke to other people. But if she wasn't a solid woman to becoming one of the strongest women I think I've ever read in this kind of setting. I can see how my Meredith would be like, oh, yeah, that how you did do that. Look what you just did. You didn't want to be here. You were forced. You thought you were going to get out of it. And then instead you flipped everything on its head and you transformed into this, this powerful woman. But the other reason I see you in this and the reason I think it probably speaks to you is she changed everything around her also.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 43:58

Yeah, yes. That really did. Yes.

**Mindy Brouse** 44:01

And I see, I see that being something you take seriously, like I see it in your business, I seen in your life, that as you become a stronger person, you are not just focused on that. You want the entire situation and environment and the others around you to also do that. And she does this.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz 44:22**

This exactly why I wanted to talk to you about this because I knew that intellectually, but now that you're saying that what I'm really seeing is this is the story of an Enneagram One who basically spends her entire life trying her hardest to make better the situation around her, to make it more perfect than it was, to make everyone's life even incrementally better would be a win for her and she decides to do that. I think that is that is definitely why that piece of it spoke to me. Also, you know, I've built my career on building a company full of women. And she does that here because there are a definite business in order to run an abbey, there are business elements that she has to get right? That people before her, even the men who kind of had had charge of the abbey before and let it come to ruin, had completely let them down. Which brings me to what I think is an interesting element of this story. There's almost a dystopian element to the story, given how men largely disappear from the story, right? I mean, not actually like it's not actually dystopian but but in our story, what we experience in the story, men are gone, they never really appear. They are nameless and shapeless, in some ways, in some big thematic ways, it reminds me of *The Power*, or more recently, a book called *The End of Men*. The male perspective is completely and wholly gone here. We are only looking at life through a feminine lens. I also love that there were themes of beauty and ugliness with ugliness winning over and over again, in this book. How interesting is that? In fact, in this novel, being homely, I'm using the word that the author uses the badge of honor, as beautiful women seem to have no real power or agency in their lives. It is only when men leave them alone, that these women can build something of value. And there's also a fascinating theme of confinement versus freedom. Is Marie a prisoner at the Abbey or has she cut off from males society actually found the ultimate freedom, and is a life of little choice, the breeding ground for true creativity? To circle back on what you were just saying, sometimes having too many choices, or getting too much of what we want, can shut down the most powerful parts of us. But you take a smart woman and give her very little room to move, and she will find a way to clean up a mess, grow a garden, and finally build an empire. I also think this is a story of resilience of a woman being cast out of her family and her life and finding herself at her very lowest point. And then again, to your point, Mindy, slowly but surely clawing her way out. In its largest grandest sweep *Matrix* is about the years passing and the stages of life, stacking one on top of the other and our feelings and our long held thoughts changing and softening, and hardening over time. Because we really see that. We meet Marie when she's 17. Yeah, this book spans her entire life,

**Mindy Brouse 47:59**

it does. Something that I found very intriguing about this was I am the opposite here. I I'm not a Lauren Groff fan, but I struggle because Meredith, in this novel, I felt like Lauren Groff is hating and loving women at the same time. And that's because Marie keeps going back and forth, on certain women that she really, really dislikes And if Maria dislikes somebody, it's, she really dislikes them, she really dislikes them. And then if she's neutral, something I love about this character is that she can keep them in the neutral land. And I think that's pretty difficult for people to do in general. So I felt like she does that so well, that she makes Marie this complicated woman who is going to show everyone what she can do, and snatches power away from those who refuse to give it to her, which is just fantastic. And yet, she's still struggling with a particular woman that she just starts to kind of hate. And I see some of that in the writing where she talks about women not being taken seriously or her not taking them seriously, or they're frivolous or whatever. But at the same time, every time she feels that way, she also gives each

of those women opportunities to prove themselves, which I think is a sign of a real strong woman and I again, I see that in you. I can see in your life when you have taken time to go and I'm not sure about this person. But I'm going to give it the benefit of the doubt and I'm going to let you prove that I'm either right or wrong on how I'm pegging you. And she does that.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz 49:55**

You are right Mindy that if I do that, and someone kind of comes down on the wrong side of that it is really hard for me to come back for that. So yeah, I'm really seeing now how much time I just really was so on the same wavelength as Marie. I'm seeing that now in a totally different way than I did when I was actually reading it.

**Mindy Brouse 50:21**

I love that you can connect to a nun. I mean, I just think that but I think it because she's not a nun. And that may be spoilery.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz 50:31**

But that's the thing. This is not, she's not a not, it's not a book about nuns. And that's the thing that I think is so genius about it. It's a book about women, and how to interact with each other and build each other up and tear each other down and live with each other and hate each other and love each other and all those things.

**Mindy Brouse 50:55**

And I think Meredith, I think the reason you brought this to me, and I feel like I liked it, because it's also about women who are in a system that gives them very little. And they have to make decisions in this novel at different times. Marie makes some decisions that she knows is gonna bring fury, which I actually loved. Each of the women that she has to interact with has to make a decision. Will they choose a system, and I'm not necessarily saying it's the nun system, there's all kinds of systems, right that women that we walk around in. I'm not in a nunnery, but there are systems I operate in that I have to battle at times. And these women in the medieval time, have to do it. But it's because Marie says, "Hey, we're gonna do this, and you're gonna get to make a decision here." And I love it. And I think it's why she becomes so beloved, even though she's infuriating people as she goes, right? I mean, this whole book, she's ticking people off all over the place. Right from the start. She makes decisions, she's changing the things.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz 52:11**

Well, okay, so we've talked a lot about how the things that we like about and I clearly, you know, spoiler alert, I absolutely loved it from start to finish. Now, I also want you to tell me, where maybe you had some strong or differing opinions. Or what do you think we need to know?

**Mindy Brouse 52:28**

So my my big thing about this book, and it's because I'm a person of faith, I just want to give a kind of a heads up to our Catholic listeners, if you are a Orthodox or strong practicing Catholic, this book is going to have some things in it that deal with sexual discussion and sexual behavior that is going to be

outside the realm of Orthodox, with our nuns in the nunnery. And for me, that was very off putting. That's something I can I mean, gosh, if you've been listening to any episode on everyone knows, I'm not a big fan of sex in books, I can do it. And that's fine. I mean, I can read about 'em, Yes, I can also do sex, but I need I can read about 'em. But there are some lines, I typically don't cross. And this is one, where it's outside the norm of what I would consider within my faith behavior. But at the same time, I have also been challenged, right, and I think, this topic, and I, we're not going to say what because it is I feel like a spoiler. This topic also brings some really great conversations to light that need to happen within certain face about

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 53:52

like sexuality and values and how our bodies

**Mindy Brouse** 53:55

Sexuality and body, and how our bodies work. And I think that is actually even though it was really uncomfortable for me, I think that was worth reading. But I will say Meredith, this is a really strong, beautiful, if not unusual, feminist book that I'm really glad you brought to my table, and I am glad I read.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 54:16

So thank you for being willing to read it. I knew when I recommended it to you, as I was finishing up my my kind of thoughts, what how I was gonna bring it to the show like you I was gonna say, I'm not, this isn't a book that I would say everyone should read. It's not a book that I think is going to be a major hit across the board at all by any stretch of the imagination. But it was a really, really big hit for me. Liz Hein also really loved it, which was wonderful. And so I think it's one of those books if it's for you. It's really, really for you.

**Mindy Brouse** 54:49

I do want to say Meredith even though I can see why you would say this is either for someone or really not, I have to admit I am kind of in the middle and I think I want to say that if somebody can press through the sexual scenes that I have,

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 55:06

which are not, which are just a couple in the book, and you can just skip right past them.

**Mindy Brouse** 55:10

Well, I reread it again before today just to make, they're about 10.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 55:15

Really?

**Mindy Brouse** 55:16

If, yeah, but I mean Meredith, you have a different life than I do when it comes to this area. We all know that. Meredith after dark is a thing. But if you can skip them, or however you need to do it, this book

really does offer some really great conversations even I will say about faith, and women's role in it. And I really love that part of it.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 55:42

It would be a great book club book, don't you think?

**Mindy Brouse** 55:45

Oh, 100% do I think this would be a fantastic book club.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 55:48

So would Fates and Furies. Again, my love for Lauren Groff knows no end. Okay. All right. Let's welcome everybody back who decided that they were not going to listen to us talk about a 12th century nunnery. And let's start talking about some books that we want to press. What did you bring today?

**Mindy Brouse** 56:08

All right. Meredith, if you had asked me a year ago, if I would press a book about something called a murderbot, I would have laughed at you. But here we are. I hope I can sell this because this is truly a great series. All right, I am bringing to the press list All Systems Red by Martha Wells. This is number one in a series. All Systems Red brings us a security unit android, who really just wants to do its job and then go back to its room to watch all of its favorite media is what it calls it, which has all its TV shows. The SecUnit has hacked itself on the sly, and is also providing security for a group of scientists who are trying to complete a mission on surface tests on a planet. SecUnit refers to itself in its mind only as Murderbot, kind of mocking its job because as a SecUnit, it is highly, highly dangerous and its job is to protect the team at all cost. And that means there's a lot of killing. It is also scornful of what it refers to as idiotic humans in its mind and the idiotic humans it constantly has to protect which Murderbot says we just can't survive on our own because we're a bunch of idiots. This snark, the hilarious banter and the awaking of this Murderbot as a person wooed me immediately. I grinned constantly amid the action in the sciency stuff. That is all a background to this character's story with the humans. The story, of course, isn't just about what is happening on the surface, the science and the action is the background, but what is happening in Murderbot and the emotions which it constantly tries to deny its having because it calls it quote "stupid emotions", and the mind of an android who has been told it's not a person when it meets a team of humans who believe otherwise. Despite all the evidence of the Company, which is a corporation controlling the universe in this this series, Murderbot has to decide who its going to believe. Now, I have to thank Jen Hayden at @Jensbookshelves for gifting me this novella. I may have avoided it much longer if she hadn't quite actually put it into my hands. There are six in this series, and all of them are novellas except one, making this series a really quick read. As an unusual Mindy comment, I prefer this on paper, which we all know I'm a big, hard and fast audio fan, because I loved how I read Murderbot without any voices telling me how to read it. And what I mean by that is I read Murderbot as a female for some reason. I was 100% throwing down with Jen and Stacey and Joy and insisted somewhere that this was a she but it's not true. I'm not sure how I got there, but I fell in love with what we all now call Lady Murderbot. That character is actually sexless. And the author is intentional on that. And it's why I prefer it on paper because the audio uses a male voice. And that gives, in my opinion, a skewed view on Murderbot. Meredith, I keep saying I'm not a science fiction



reader, but I have pressed two science fiction books before and this is my third so maybe I'm deceiving myself. Be brave readers and try a book that is about a murderbot.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 59:36

I have heard more people rave about the Murderbot series. I haven't read it myself but I do have the first one on my Kindle. I have just heard so many people say that they loved, it their teenagers loved it, they buddy read it. People just absolutely love it. So I think that's a perk. Okay, well, my press, just thinking I'm going to go from raving about Matrix to raving about a book that I don't think could be any more different if it tried which is I'm going to press the Night of Miracles by Elizabeth Berg. Now Elizabeth Berg is another author who I absolutely love. I've read several in her canon. I go to her for comfort books. So she's not the same as Debbie Macomber. Her books don't have the same level of sweetness, but they're on the same part of the spectrum. So they're comfort reads for me. So in Night of Miracles, we have Lucille, who's a 94 year old but spicy as heck, and she teaches baking classes. And then we've got Monica who works at the local diner, and she has a major crush on one of the regulars there. And that regular, we learn his story and who he loves. And Lucille is next door neighbors to Jason and Abby and their 10 year old son, Lincoln, and all of these people as with all of Elizabeth Berg's books, we learn their stories individually and then we see how their stories all intertwine and you just care so much about them. Again, this is comfort reading at its best. And I really sometimes like this at holiday time, like that period of time as we edge toward Thanksgiving and Christmas, but it's not like fully December yet. Elizabeth Berg is that sweet spot for me. So that's why I wanted to bring it right here. This is just such a feel good book along the lines of also A.J. Fikry so that we're in that realm, just to kind of let you guys know. This is a follow up to The Story of Arthur Truluv, which I actually hadn't read. When I picked up The Night of Miracles, I didn't know. Yeah, I didn't know that this was related. It stands alone, for sure

**Mindy Brouse** 1:01:36

I did not know that and I love this book also. Yeah, Shut the front door.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 1:01:41

I'm gonna go back and read The Story of Arthur Truluv, which I do have. The best way to describe this book is that it's like one of those great hugs that you get when you really realize how much you needed a hug. You're both happy and grateful and full of emotion all at the same time. That is this book. This is Night of Miracles by Elizabeth Berg.

**Mindy Brouse** 1:02:02

I love that book. And I feel like Harry's Trees and Night of Miracles live in the same universe.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 1:02:07

For sure. Yep. Yeah, Yep, absolutely. That's the that's the universe that we're that we're in. Alright, that is it for this week. As a reminder, here's where you can connect with us. You can find me on Meredith at @Meredith.reads on Instagram. And you can find Kaytee at @notesonbookmarks on Instagram.

**Mindy Brouse** 1:02:24

And you can find me Mindy at @gratefulforgrace on Instagram.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 1:02:28

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](http://currentlyreadingpodcast.com).

**Mindy Brouse** 1:02:39

You can also contact us directly at @currentlyreadingpodcast on Instagram or via email at [currentlyreadingpodcast@gmail.com](mailto:currentlyreadingpodcast@gmail.com).

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 1:02:47

And if you really want to help us, become a patron, get a bunch of great content and access to our fantastic bookish community for just \$5 a month. Or you can rate and review us on Apple podcasts or you can shout us out on social media. You can do all of those things and they all help us to find our perfect listening audience.

**Mindy Brouse** 1:03:09

Yes, bookish friends are the best friends. Thank you so much for all of those ways of sharing.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 1:03:14

Until next week, happy reading Mindy.

**Mindy Brouse** 1:03:16

Happy reading Meredith.