



Season 4, Episode 21: Our Top 10 of 2021!

Mon, 1/3 • 1:22:16

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 read recently. And you should know we don't shy away from those 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. This week, we have a very special episode for you.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 00:30

I'm Meredith Monday Schwartz, a mom of four and full time CEO living in Austin, Texas. And you guys know, I love lists, especially Best Of lists.

Kaytee Cobb 00:39

And I'm Kaytee Cobb, a homeschooling mom of four living in New Mexico, and I have a pirate's treasure chest filled with my favorite books of the year. This is episode number 21 of season four. And we are so glad you're here.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 00:51

So it is not easy doing what we've done to prepare for today's show. It is not easy. We are going to be talking about our top 10 books of 2021 and this is serious business. There have been major, major, just angst and temper tantrums and tears shed over actually figuring out these 10 books. This was probably the hardest it's ever been for me.

Kaytee Cobb 00:56

it's so difficult every year. This year, I had to do like a quick and dirty cull, and then really agonized for a solid day just trying to get it down to those top 10. So know that we love you all. And that's how this list actually makes it to your ears because otherwise it would just be torturing ourselves.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 01:39

Exactly. So yes, we are going to get into that. And we are looking forward to it. We're ready to talk about those books. But first we are because it's the first show of the month, we always take a little bit of time you guys know to do the only commercial that you're going to hear for the entire month because we

never have commercials in our show. And that is for the Currently Reading Bookish Friends. That's the people who subscribe to our Patreon. So we wanted to talk a little bit about why it's a good deal, it's a good thing to do to start off your 2022.

Kaytee Cobb 02:10

It is a good deal Meredith. Over at Patreon at patreon.com/currentlyreadingpodcast, we have so much great bonus content. And the best part about Patreon is that everybody that becomes a bookish friend really buys into what makes Currently Reading happen, which is that you get to listen every week ad free. We get to call this a real job and be here with y'all every week. And we we want to make that worth your time by giving you some really great content. So if you join now you can get all of the Indie Press List episodes from last year. You can get all of Kaytee Reads Too Much. You can get all of All Things Murderful with Meredith plus everything else we've ever released over there. We do not close it down after a certain number of months. It's all available for you. But what's really exciting about this month is that next week we have something special coming for our patrons. All Things Murderful is getting a facelift. What are you doing over there Meredith?

Meredith Monday Schwartz 03:05

It is getting a facelift. It's getting a glow up. So All Things Murderful is the show that I do for our Patreon and I've done it for more than a year now. And it focuses on, as you would guess from the name, mysteries and thrillers. And I love it. Love it. Love it. Love it. And as I got toward the end of the year, I started thinking, "How can I make sure that All Things Murderful continues to be everything that mystery and thriller lovers want it to be?" And I immediately knew that that meant I needed to add another voice, one of my favorite voices, one of my dearest friends Elizabeth Barnhill from Fabled bookshop in Waco, Texas. She is my source for so many of the mysteries and thrillers that I read and that I bring to the big show. And she's been reading as I have in the genre for a really long time. It is both of our favorite genre. So we are keeping the format, loosely similar, it's going to be very familiar, but it's going to have both Elizabeth and my voice and it's going to have both of our recommendations. And we are just so looking forward to doing the show together going forward. I think it's gonna be a lot of fun.

Kaytee Cobb 04:20

It's gonna be so fun. And you and Elizabeth are such great, personable friends as well. So I know the chemistry there is going to be amazing. I cannot wait to get to experience that myself as a listener. That's one of my other favorite things about Patreon is that we have content that the two of us do separately, so then we get to enjoy it from the other side of things and All Things Murderful is one of my favorite things to get to enjoy as a listener.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 04:43

I hope that everyone will sort of decide what parts of this content sound good to them. Join us over on Patreon again for almost 100 bonus episodes that are sitting there right now ready for you to unlock. It's the beginning of January. It's the beginning of the year. It's the perfect big time to join us. Become a bookish friend. You also get to be a part of our gigantic bookish friends Facebook group, which is incredibly active and so many people are meeting and becoming in real life friends there. There's just a

lot of reasons to spend that \$5 a month on Currently Reading. Alright, Mischief Managed Kaytee. That is our one commercial for the month. Now we can get to what everyone is actually here for. We are going to finally reveal our top 10 books of 2021. Now, I think it's important for us to make sure everyone knows, of course, top, you know, top books of the year episodes and articles and posts are everywhere. And I love them. I love them everywhere that I see them. I think it's important to note that one thing that's different about our lists is that we are not just doing our top 10 books that were published in 2021. We are literally saying these were the books that we read in 2021 that are our very top our very, very favorites.

Kaytee Cobb 05:24

We are doing that. And it's so fun to be able to look back at the year as a whole and to not have to say, Oh, well, that one's a little older. We love that you all can pick up a number of these books right away from your library, because they're backlist titles. So I think I think that's what I love most about our top 10. I mean, not to toot our own horns or anything, but toot toot.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 06:26

Well, it just makes it something a little bit different. And for that reason, you know, again, I love listening to all the episodes and really culling down the best books that came out this year. But for us, we look at it just a little bit differently. So okay, Kaytee, when you sat down to make this list, what was your process? Walk us through. We've already talked about the fact that it was difficult. But how did you actually come to this list in the order that you did it? And because we do do it in a ranked order.

Kaytee Cobb 06:53

We do it in a ranked order. The very first thing I did, I keep just a simple text note on my phone of every book I've read so far for the year. The very first thing I did was kind of an intuitive gut check, I just started going through that list and deleting things that didn't feel like the right fit for my top 10. I didn't look at what I rated them at the time, I didn't look at am I balanced from front of the year versus back half of the year, I just went with my gut and said, "What on this list really screams out to me?", because for me, this is less than 10% of my reads. This is less than 3% of my reads for the year. And that means I have to be able to be quick and dirty for my first pass. And thankfully, I could trust my gut pretty well, because that first pass got me down to 30 books right away, which is great, because I'm gonna be sharing those 30 elsewhere as well. So I'm excited about that. And then after that, that's when the agony started. What about you, Meredith? How did you bring your numbers down to something a little more manageable?

Meredith Monday Schwartz 07:53

Alright, so my total number of books for the year ended up being 120, which is fairly similar to the 116 that I read in 2020. It was just 3% higher. But of those 120 books, I had 19 that I had rated as a five star book. So that's where I started. I went through my five star books and just made like you did, I opened up my notes app and just made a list of those 19 books. And then I basically looked at that and said, Okay, how am I feeling about these books now? Exactly as you did, because it is interesting that things change over time as you process a book. And so I immediately knocked four books off that list, because I just knew that they didn't really have, they weren't screaming best of to me. They weren't

books that I just absolutely felt I had to talk about. And so I feel like that was that got me down to 15. And that's where the agony started. Right? Because then I had to cut five, I had to cut five more off of that list. I went back and forth, I sort of would take some out and put some back in and what I realized I was actually doing because I finally stopped to ask myself like, "Well, why am I you know, why am I putting this slotting this one in and not this one?" and it's because my reading this year changed substantively. And I realized that I was going to be able to pick 10 books that would in this very memorable year of reading were ones that are going to stick with me for a very long time, ones that I think about all the time, ones that I'm constantly pressing in people's hands, not necessarily books that I'm pressing in everyone's hands, though. And I think that's a distinction, right? I could pick a list of 10 other books that I read this year, that I think would would be real crowd pleasers. That's not this list. This was very personal and when I came to this final list of 10 I looked at it and said, it really it matches my reading for this year. It includes the books that are absolutely going to stay with me. And every one of them in one way, shape or form was a surprise to me. And that is really the theme of my reading for this year. I realized, as I looked over everything, this reading year was full of surprises, both in books that I thought I would love and didn't, in books that I thought I would hate and loved, in books that don't normally call to me that did. And so that surprising element is the theme all the way through for me, and I'm really happy with the final 10 that I came up with. They're very indicative of 2021 reading for me.

Kaytee Cobb 10:36

I'm really excited to hear about them. And I do, I do wonder, as I was making my list, if we are going to have any overlap at all this year. Some years, we sit down to record this episode, and I'm nearly positive, that we're going to have one or two books that you know, I can count on you to put them on the list, even though I love them as well. But this year, I'm just not sure about it. And I'm excited about that as well.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 10:59

I think there's potentially one place where we might have overlap, but I too will be very interested in I think the fact that our reading is so different, and our top 10 lists don't have a lot of overlap, I think that's a really, really good thing for us, for each other and recommending books to each other. And then also for the listeners because that means that we're giving them a wide swath of books, which is something that I think we both are really happy to do. Alright, so let's get into this. So what we're going to do is we're going to go through the list, but we're going to take a couple of intermissions and give you some superlatives that we've come up with that we're going to kind of sprinkle in to kind of break things up a little bit. So, Kaytee, let's start out. Do you want to give us an overview of your reading? How many books did you end up with for 2021? I think we are all waiting for this number. So my number, my number was 120. Kaytee, what's your final number?

Kaytee Cobb 11:53

Well, we have five days left? I don't know. I think it's gonna be 300 even which will be really exciting, but I'm not totally sure.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 12:02

Okay, so you're hovering right at that round number.

Kaytee Cobb 12:07

We have five days left in the year right now, as we're recording. Right now I am slotting in books that I want to clear for my shelves that I don't think are going to be big hits out of the park for me, they've just been waiting for a while for me. And I know what they are. I'm slotting them in. I'm pretty sure I'm going to hit right at 300, or maybe a little less by the end of the year. And that's slightly less than I hit last year, which was a goal of mine for 2021. I wanted to read less. I didn't do great at it. Because I was just over 300 last year, but I do feel good that I'm going to be under 300 this year or right around this. So it's a large number.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 12:49

But I feel like it's a more manageable number like 300 or below feels like a more manageable number for everything that you have going on in your life right now.

Kaytee Cobb 12:57

Yes, that is true.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 12:59

And if you end up at 299, how much is that going to bother you?

Kaytee Cobb 13:03

You know what? I'm going to be okay with it. I don't beat myself up about making sure I have a round number at the bottom of the year. I'm not going to on on New Year's Eve sit there and go find one of my kids' graphic novels just so I can knock out one additional book. Because I think whatever number it is that reflects what my year was like, and I don't have to try and squish it into a box that I want it to fit into. So I'm okay with it.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 13:28

Right. Absolutely. Right. I mean, for me, I mean, you, you know, I've said a million times, I'd never make, numbers of books is never a goal for me. And so for that reason, right, I don't care what number it ends up being at all. It's interesting to note from my reading that I hit 120, which was just 3% more than 2020's reading, but I'm so much more satisfied with my reading this year than last year. It's like a complete 180. Now a lot of that could have to do with pandemic stuff, and you know, everything that 2020 brought for us. But I do feel like I got better at choosing books for myself in 2021.

Kaytee Cobb 14:11

That is that is always a very satisfying feeling. I'm very glad about that for you.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 14:15

Alright, Kaytee. Do you want to tell us what your number 10 Book of 2021 is?

Kaytee Cobb 14:20

You know, my number 10 book was actually the hardest one for me to choose. I knew what I wanted for those top 5,6,7 and then I got to the bottom and then it felt like oh, but I really want to fit him in here. And I really want to put her here. So this was my hardest choice. And I'm going with Legendborn by Tracy Deonn. So I talked about this one the first time on episode 40 of Season Three. This is a YA fantasy gem with Arthurian legend, the legend of King Arthur wrapped into a summer school college program. We've got Bree whose mother recently died in a car accident. While she's not an orphan, she does decide to leave home for the summer for this early college program, so she's a teen living without her parents. While she's there, she witnesses a magical attack on her first night on campus and another student attempts to wipe her memory but fails at it. This opens Bree's eyes to a magical underworld on campus, which is majority white and firmly focused on legacy families and making sure that the families that have been part of this magical society are the ones that continue to be part of this magical society. She definitely does not fit in there. And I loved the way that Tracy Deonn built this world for us. I'm so excited that there's another book coming out. And this one just keeps sticking with me even though it was early or late in Season Three that I talked about it, so almost a year ago. This one is Legendborn by Tracy Deonn.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 15:47

I'm going to talk about my top 10 books of the year. When I put my lists together, I wanted to take a quick look at some of my reading just as far as what genres was I reading more of or less, because I had some gut instincts, I wanted to check them out. Which by the way, next year, when I start using your reading tracker, which is a part of what you get when you're a bookish friend, I am going to switch over to yours because right now, my current spreadsheet doesn't have the ability to do this so automatically, but yours does. So this will be much easier for me next year. But I did take the time to do some actual counting here. And what I found is that of my 120 books, only 12 of those were nonfiction. Still a little bit low for me, but higher than in 2020. So I definitely had, I had four more than than I had in 2020. So that number came up a little bit. And then one of the things that I really, really, really have been thinking a lot about my reading is I've been feeling like I've been reading more literary fiction than ever before and I've been feeling like maybe I'm not reading as much as many mysteries and thrillers as I have in the past. But when I actually did my count for my reads this year 56, 56 of those books of the 120 were mysteries or thrillers. And so that's 47%. So that's about what feels really normal to me. So my gut instinct told me that I had been like not reading that as much. But the numbers bore out something completely different. So I sort of felt better about that. So that's definitely a good thing. And another thing that I my gut instinct told me had changed, and it in fact did was that only 11, out of my 120 books were middle grade. I felt like I had read less middle grade in 2021. But I read a lot more middle grade than normal in 2020. I think that's because middle grade is comfort reading for me. So this year, you can really see in my list that I was able to read harder this year. My brain had more space in it. I had more patience for more character driven novels than ever before and I didn't have as much need to go to as much comfort reading I did some, but not as much. So there were definitely some adjustments to my reading this year. But speaking of middle grade, like you my number 10 spot was difficult. And in fact, I had two middle grade books that were in the only middle grade on my list. Two books that were vying for this position. One of them that I actually had on my show script, all the way up till about 10 minutes before we we recorded was gonna be Fablehaven by Brandon Mull, which I

absolutely loved. But what I decided to slot in for the number 10, because it has just stayed with me, for so many months after I've read it is *A Place to Hang the Moon* by Kate Albus. I absolutely love this book. This book is the one about the orphans, who basically put themselves on a train to be taken to the countryside in World War Two in England. And everyone thinks they're going there to escape the war, but they're really going there in the hopes of finding a family, like a family to keep them permanently. And this is just, it's such a fantastic book, because there's some hard things in it. But it's really full of hope. It's a book about books. It's got a great library. It's got a great librarian. It's got siblings that you just so badly want things to go well for them. And it has that trope that I absolutely love, the swing up trope, right? Where things are really, really hard at the beginning of the book, and then it swings up to a really redemptive sweet ending. So I just absolutely had to put this one as my number 10 book of the year because I think about it all the time. There's some scenes that are just so heartwarming, they just filled me with a warm, cozy feeling. So that's *A Place to Hang the Moon* by Kate Albus.

Kaytee Cobb 20:01

I'm glad you chose that one because that one's very memorable for me also, because you talked me into it so quickly when you talked about it on the episode, and I had to message you while I read it, because I couldn't stop wanting to talk to you about it. So I would be like, "This is what's happening right now. And this is how I feel about it".

Meredith Monday Schwartz 20:17

I know, I know. Lots and lots of people ended up picking that one up, and it just was a great, especially for that last quarter of the year. I think it's just a really great book to fit into fall and winter reading. Really, it's a great one. All right, what's your number nine?

Kaytee Cobb 20:32

Okay, my number nine for this year is my only romance on the list, which is a little odd for me. I have not done my full stats for the year to figure out how my reading has changed, but I do think I read less romance in 2021. So this is my only one on the list. And it's the only one I haven't talked about on the big show yet. It's *Love Hypothesis* by Ali Hazelwood. Bookish friend Candice coined the term this year "romance plus", and that's when a romance has all the elements that make it a romance, but it also tackles something a little deeper. In this case, this romance plus has the tropes of a slight age gap with a young professor to an older college student. So it's a slight age gap. It's not a 20 year age gap. Settle down, folks, right? There is a one bed situation at one point. There's a fake dating trope. And in the sexy scenes, it is very open door, right? What makes it a plus is that it also tackles women in academia in a really revealing and sensitive way, which may or may not open the readers' eyes to something that they haven't really recognized before. And I love that. I love it when a romance says, "Here's something fun, and feisty and sexy and also this," and one more thing to make this a little deeper for you. So Olive is our main character. She's a third year PhD candidate whose bestie is constantly trying to find her the perfect match. That's why Olive walks onto campus one day and kisses the first hot dude she runs into on campus. Unfortunately, that hot dude is a cranky professor, a well known a-hole named Adam Carlson. She is just trying to convince her friend that she's in a relationship. But Adam is willing to go along for the ride for his own underhanded purposes. As we all know, fake dating tropes often turned

real when one or both of the people catch feelings and the tension here ratchets up to level 11 as they struggle with "Wait, does he like me? Wait, do I like him? I don't know what's going on." Right? Once you finish this one, and you've taken a cold shower, you want to go to the author's website for a bonus chapter that y'all my scalp was steaming. I could not with this bonus chapter. This one is The Love Hypothesis by Ali Hazelwood.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 22:51

That does sound steamy, steamy. Alright, Kaytee, I am the worst. I am the literal worst, but I was getting ready to do my number nine and I'm going to make a switch. I'm going to make a real time switch. I am because I feel like I'm just going to be kicking myself if I don't make this switch.

Kaytee Cobb 23:09

I'm shocked.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 23:10

I'm going to make the switch. So this and part of that is because this is the only YA fantasy spot that I have on the list, but I read a lot of really good way fantasy this year, so it was vying for this spot. Furyborn for sure was definitely vying for the spot. I had it in and out and in and out multiple times. That's what she said. And then also my show rundown has Shadow and Bone by Leigh Bardugo, which I absolutely loved, loved loved part of the Grishaverse. But my heart is telling me that I must use this one YA fantasy slot to slot in one of my favorite books ever, which is the third in the series which is ridiculous. A Court of Wings and Ruin by Sarah J Maas. Now, I'm not gonna spend a lot of time talking about this book. I haven't talked about it yet on the big show so I'm not gonna spend a lot of time. It's the third in the series. Who the heck wants to hear anyone talk about a third in a series right? But you guys, I just love this series so much and Roxanna and I read it together. We always try to read something in that series at this time of year. We liked it as much as we liked Mist and Fury, which is book number two, which we didn't think was possible. We liked Wings and Ruin even as much, even though it's different. It's got a lot of strategy and it's got a lot of like political machinations in it. I love this series so much I asked for the entire hardback series for Christmas which my husband was sweet enough to gift to me. So I just I love this world. I love these characters like with my whole heart so I just know I will be kicking myself so that's what I'm slotting in my number nine A Court of Wings and Ruin which is the third in The Sarah J. Maas, A Court of Thorns and Roses series and yes, yes, yes, you must read it in order. You have to go back and start with A Court of Thorns and Roses. Yes. And I will be talking about this more in the big show because I have a lot to say about it. But it has to go as my number nine.

Kaytee Cobb 25:16

Every time you read further in that series, my heart explodes a little bit more and I'm so excited it made it onto your top 10.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 25:22

It's just so we flew through that book is a big, chunky. Yeah. And we flew through it in like a week, which we never do with our I mean, like, yeah, we we just flew through that book. It's so good.

Kaytee Cobb 25:37

Love it. Love it. Love it. Okay, my eighth book. That's what we're on now is one that I did talk about on the show. And you can mark it down as one of the few times Kaytee cried on the show. It's *The Day the World Came to Town* by Jim DeFede, which I talked about on episode 14 of Season Four. This book is nonfiction, and it doesn't take much to set up. It's also not very long, but oh friends, it packs a punch. Okay, so on 9/11, the world's airspace shut down. There were 38 planes that were diverted to Gander, Newfoundland. This caused the town's population to swell overnight by almost double. But the people of Gander open their kitchens and their homes and their hearts to the displaced passengers for the four days that followed. Some of them became truly fast friends in one of the darkest times in their lives. When I talked about it on the show, I cried. And I told you that this is a story about the best of us. And the many listeners who have picked it up since then have agreed with me and tagged me in lots of posts that again, they make my heart grow three sizes. I love them so much. If you listener are feeling overwhelmed by the state of the world and the COVID and the crazy and the politics and everything, or feeling like sometimes your fellow humans do more harm than good, pick this one up and have your faith and in humanity restored tenfold. It's *The Day the World Came to Town* by Jim DeFede.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 26:59

Well, that definitely had to be on the list. You cried talking about it. I cried listening to you talk about it. So many people have read and loved that book. It's not an easy read. But it sounds like it's so so good. Okay, so my number eight is the only nonfiction that's on my list. And this one was a slam dunk. I absolutely knew that this had to be on my top 10 books of the year. I've actually purchased this book, and it's in my forever library now, which is something that is you know, I only do that for a very, very small number of books. This is *Wintering: The Power of Rest and Retreat in Difficult Times*, and this is by Katherine May. So when I talked about on the show, I talked about this in Season Three, Episode 31 and I mentioned that I kind of been circling around it. It has this really beautiful cover, but I sort of had been circling around it and then we had the ice storm or Snowmageddon, which is what we call it here in Texas in February of 2021. And luckily, before all the ice came and shut the entire city of Austin down, I had gotten this book, and I am so glad because it was the perfect book to read during that time, when we were literally wintering. It is actually about, it's a series of memoirs. So Katherine May talks about things that happen in her life. And it's also essays that are sort of just lovely and contemplative, but all of it is about times in our life seasons, some real seasons, like some actual weather related things and some seasons that come when we least expect it, that require us to winter, or to rest and retreat in difficult times or for a season to have a rebirth or to grow in a different way in the next season. And I just felt like this was the right book at the right time. I felt like this book was speaking to the very center of me, not just because we had cold weather outside or snow for the first time ever, but also because with everything we had gone through with the lockdown following COVID, we all were forced into a rest and retreat that we weren't excited about, a rest and retreat that we did not want. But I think we all experienced some elements of it that we ended up thinking were positive and helped us to go into the next season of our lives. So for those reasons, all of those reasons together, this book just stuck with me. As I said, I bought it for my permanent library, and I often will go and just kind of randomly open it up. Her writing is very beautiful. There's so many things in it that I learned that I never knew before about how different parts of nature, winter, not just bears and hibernating but wolves and

ants and bees, exactly. And all and she kind of goes into that but never in a textbook way. Just in a way that really draws back to the fact that we, as living beings on this earth can really benefit from leaning in instead of fighting against a season of wintering. So I loved this book, this is Wintering: The Power of Rest and Retreat in Difficult Times by Katherine May. And that's my number eight book.

Kaytee Cobb 30:20

This is one that Meredith made me do it, just like y'all like to hashtag things Meredith made me do it. Same same friends, and I just finished it maybe five to 10 days ago, before we're recording this. It was the perfect time to read it. So if you're hearing this on January 3, and it is the dead of winter, go get this book. It's the perfect time to read it. Slow but steady I think is the way to go with this to because a little bit each day just feeds your soul in a totally different way.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 30:46

Exactly. My notes say this is a book to be savored, and I think that that's exactly the way to do it.

Kaytee Cobb 30:51

Definitely. Okay, Meredith, my number seven book is the the one spot that I'm like, Well, maybe we'll both have it on our lists. And so what I'm plotting here is Project Hail Mary, by Andy Weir. Do you have this on your list?

Meredith Monday Schwartz 31:07

I do not have this on my list. But it's not because I didn't absolutely love it because everyone, I loved loved loved this book.

Kaytee Cobb 31:16

Okay, well, that means you're getting a full 20 here because this is the one spot but I was worried that maybe we'd only have 19 or 20. So this one Meredith brought to Episode 42 of Season Three, which means I did not talk about it on the big show. But she did. Of course, the story of Project Hail Mary has been blasted all over the place by now. And hopefully, if you haven't read it, you've managed to avoid spoilers because they're out there. This book takes you on a truly wonderful journey. Our main character is Ryland Grace, He awakens from a coma, not knowing at all where he is and with no memory of how he got there. He has to piece it together using every tool in his arsenal. Those tools happen to be filled with math and science, especially. Throughout this book, we find out not just where he is now, which is a spaceship trying to determine why Earth's sun is starting to dim and what we can do to stop it, but why he's there and we get to learn about the human capacity for resilience and fortitude and friendship in difficult times. There are many readers that get too bogged down in the science of this one. And I think that that is easier to skip over on paper. But I'll tell you that when my husband read it because I pressed it into his hands, we listened to part of it in the car on a road trip and there are some magical moments that happen on audio. So basically, you can't go wrong, as far as I'm concerned. But the reader that has less affinity to sciency brain things may want to pick up the paper version. Either way, I think it's a hit out of the park. I love it. It's Project Hail Mary by Andy Weir.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 32:47

Yes, I'm so glad that you brought that no question a highlight of my reading year. I read it on Kindle and I'm just gonna double down on the fact that I know the audio brings a lot to the table but I think because I'm not a big science person. I skimmed the science stuff and anytime Andy Weir says, "So what that means is" and he does this a lot he says something like "So what that means is" just reengage right there and you are not going to be missing anything. And this book is such an incredible ride. Every single person that we I think for both of us that we've recommended it to has absolutely loved it. So this Project Hail Mary is just a must read.

Kaytee Cobb 33:27

Definitely love it. All right, what's your seventh book, Meredith?

Meredith Monday Schwartz 33:32

Okay, my seventh book is a book that was surprising in some ways and not at all surprising in other ways. My number seven book is State of Terror by Hillary Rodham Clinton and Louise Penny. Now not surprising because Louise Penny, right? Everyone knows how I feel about her and her writing, but I think what was surprising were two things. First of all, it's been forever since I've read a really good political thriller. Right. So that just doesn't happen very much. And also, I think I was surprised at how much it felt like Louise Penny's writing, it just you can hear her writing. You can hear her voice all the way through it, and I absolutely loved it. But then when it's matched with a really, really strong plotline, which is very hard to succinctly summarize, in a rundown for a book on a podcast. But you know it when you put those things together, it just was such a great read. It's another big chunky, but I flew through it and I was talking with bookish friend Betsy Ikenberry as she was texting me as she was reading it. She had the exact same experience for the last 100 pages. Your heart is literally pounding against your chest and I'm using the word literally properly in this sentence. It's about Ellen Adams, who's the newly installed Secretary of State in a brand new administration, and she basically has to help solve a big gigantic crisis that is threatening a lot of bad things in the world and she's doing that working closely with her best friend. And what I really like is that this is a book about two middle aged women who are best friends, and they are just kicking every booty possible. And I am so here for this kind of book. So don't worry about the summary on Amazon. It's three times longer than it should be. And it's so convoluted. This book is excellent. It's gonna take you 50 to 75 pages to get into it. So give it a little bit of time. If you get to page 75 and you're not interested, not right now it because it might not be for right now. But if you want a page turning read, this is absolutely fantastic. This is State of Terror by Hillary Rodham Clinton and Louise Penny. Okay. So, heart pounding, we've had heart pounding, let's give ourselves a little bit of a break. Let's take a deep breath. We're gonna we're gonna do one of our superlative categories here in the midst of our top 10 rundown. So, we wanted to talk because I feel like everyone wants to know this, it's fun to talk about best books of the year for sure. But it's also a little bit fun to know, Kaytee did you have a book or two that was your lowest rated books of the year?

Kaytee Cobb 36:25

Yes, I did. Meredith and we always talk about every episode that we do not shy away from having strong opinions. So I'm excited I have, I gave three books this year, two stars. And that is my lowest rating that I gave. Usually, I won't even finish a book that's two stars. But I did. So two of those three, I

read with buddies, which kind of gives them a half star bump. Really, they probably would have been one and a half stars if I had not been reading them with buddies. So it was two books. The one that still makes me seethe a little bit is Roar by Cecilia Ahern. It was a tough read. I finished this because it was a buddy read with the bookish friends, hundreds of us were reading it at the same time. There was so much to discuss in here. That's the thing about a two star book. It doesn't have to be amazing and perfect for you to have a lot to unpack about a book, right? But every chapter, I had bigger and bigger problems with it. I found something else that I disliked about it. And again, so it would have even ended up with a lower rating than that but because I was buddy reading, because I had that great discussion element in it, I ended up with two stars. The other book that that happened with was another buddy read it's the Atomic City Girls by Janet Beard. I was livid while I was reading this book that she called it the Girls of Atomic City but there's really only one girl that we're focused on. Oh that just made me so mad. It gets me all kinds of fired up but again a buddy read and that's the only reason a that I finished it and be that it's not one star. At least we were all seething together. So what about you Meredith? Were you seething at your at your low starred books or what?

Meredith Monday Schwartz 38:07

So one of them yes, one of them no, just entirely forgettable. So Roar is not on this list. I actually ended up giving for two and a half stars. I think because that buddy read element of it. But I feel totally responsible because I was the one who said let's read Roar as an entire group and hundreds of people read it because I said that. I mean not because I because that's what we decided we were gonna read together. But I stand by the fact that was a great discussion so and memorable, and I probably will remember a lot about Roar. Okay, my two least favorite lowest rated and so least favorite books of the year, one of them completely forgettable, which was called The Survivor Song by Paul Tremblay. This was one where they were like, there was like a zombie outbreak or some sort of virus was going around. And the whole time was these two women trying to get to the hospital because one woman was pregnant, and she'd been bit by one of the infected people, which could be a really great book. But it was like, we were spending all our time at roadblocks having the same argument over and over again about how this pregnant woman needed to get to a hospital and I'm just like, "I'm just bored, and I shouldn't be bored in the middle of a zombie outbreak." Okay, so that's Survivor Song. The book that I did seethe as I was reading and wanted to ratatatouille when I was done was Survive the Night by Riley Sager. I was gonna say what's what's the theme here where it's men telling us about surviving. I did not enjoy this book. You know, I have read several books by Riley Sager that at the very least were interesting the entire time. And I you know, I felt were clever in their premise, their setup and their execution. So I think Riley Sager has a lot in his cannon that's interesting. But this one Survive the Night was just too predictable for me. And also, you know, a deal breaker for me in a book is when the lead character is just dumber than dirt. And I just cannot root for that kind of character. And then, and then I end up rooting for bad things to happen to that. And then so by the end of this book I was I was rooting for someone I wasn't supposed to be rooting for. And that just doesn't feel right to me. So those were my two lowest rated books both have the word surviving. Back to the countdown, Kaytee which you're probably too young for that reference to mean anything at all. What is your number six book?

Kaytee Cobb 40:33

Okay, my number six book for 2021 is *Love Lives Here* by Amanda Jette Knox. This is a powerful memoir. It's my second nonfiction on the book list. It lets us into the life of Amanda Knox as her child comes out as trans and then her partner does as well, both within a single year. This was pressed into my hands by Katie Sikkes, who is a marvelous bookish friend from Canada, and has gotten me to read many a wonderful story. Amanda's story here gave me so many feels, and put words to some of my own emotions, as my sister has also been transitioning over this past year and a half. I've mentioned on the podcast that I have a close loved one who's transitioning, and she is ready now for me to say it here as well. Over the past nearly two years, my family and I have messed up too in many ways, large and small as we learn together, how to love and thrive through a new situation. And this memoir reminded me and us that letting love be the guiding principle behind the ways we interact with and lift each other up will cover all manner of sins. I was so moved by this story. I'm so glad I read it on so many levels. It has earned a place on my permanent shelves, and on the shelves of my sister as well. *It's Love Lives Here* by Amanda Jette Knox.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 41:59

Oh, I love it when a book can come alongside us when we're going through something new or different and really be a companion on that journey. And I am so glad that you had this book as you were going through that.

Kaytee Cobb 42:10

Yes, it was like Amanda held my hand. Right.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 42:13

Exactly. That's wonderful. That's exactly that's that's so good. All right. So my number six book is the book that I don't think it's going to surprise anybody is on this list. And that is *Pony* by R.J. Palacio, which I actually now realize I said that *A Place to Hang the Moon* was my only middle grade. And I think that's partly because *Pony* doesn't feel middle grade to me. *Pony*, and it is middle grade, but it just it feels like it transcends that genre distinction in several ways. So this was an Indie Press List pick by Page and Palette a couple of months ago. And this is surprising because as I mentioned on the big show, the title of the book, the cover of the book, none of those things are things that would normally appeal to me. But this book absolutely stole my heart. It's got an amazing story of 12 year old Silas who at the very beginning of the book, Silas and his dad, this is in the middle 1800s, they're at home and all of a sudden they hear horses approaching their home and it's three really big bad guys who are there and they basically take Silas's dad and ride away with him and Silas is left there on his own, with his companion who's always with him Mittenwool, who's a very interesting story himself, and they have to decide what they're going to do. And so this book just absolutely Silas stole my heart. It's an incredibly propulsive... this, I mean, this is really, really plot driven. There is something happening all the time in this book. And you just want everything to be okay for all of these characters. It's incredibly heartfelt, but not a crying book in the way that R.J. Palacio's *Wonder* feels like a crying book to me, which I don't take that to mean that that's not a wonderful book, but it's not one that you feel is emotionally kind of pulling you in one direction on purpose. It's just telling this amazing story. And you're just so completely

enraptured and involved in this world and with these characters. I love Pony so much. This is another one that ended up on my forever shelf for sure. So this is Pony by R.J. Palacio.

Kaytee Cobb 44:35

I'm going to get you a pirate treasure chest and put your favorite books in it.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 44:39

Yeah, well I mean yes I'm keeping more physical copies now that I have more room so yeah, I have more actual physical copies and which is lovely to have them surround I love being able to see Pony and pick it up if I want to and just look at those great daguerreotype photos that are within the but it's just a beautiful I love that story so much. That's a great one.

Kaytee Cobb 44:58

Okay, my fifth book number five on the list is The Guncle by Steven Rowley. This one I talked about on episode 45 of Season Three. This book, from the sunny cover to the parallels to my own friendship with my gay bestie, to the way it deals with grief, to the way it allows humor to shine through, I love everything about it. Steven Rowley surprises me every time he writes something, and I've read and loved all of his books so far, but none of them hold my heart like The Guncle does. Patrick is our main character. He's the guncle or the gay uncle at the center of our story. His best friend married his brother. So now they're also related. His best friend is a sister in law, which makes it especially devastating right at the beginning of the book when she dies from cancer. You're not sitting bedside, y'all. I know that can be hard for people. It's already happened by the time this book starts. When his brother has to enter rehab, suddenly, Patrick is left caring for his niece and nephew during the summer, as they all learn to navigate their grief. The sounds really tough. And I know you guys are like, Wow, a sunny cover and happy and humor, right? No. The way that Maisie and Grant, the niece and nephew open up Patrick and the way he allows unclehood to weasel its way into his heart and the way he loves these kids through the hardest time in their lives, all of that makes this a really touching story that made me laugh and cry, and totally hug it at the end. It's The Guncle by Steven Rowley.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 46:23

Alright, so we're definitely taking a left turn here from The Guncle. Okay, my fifth book is The Devotion of Suspect X by Keigo Higashino. I loved this book, most because it's an absolutely perfectly executed mystery. I would call it a literary mystery, really, because we're not this is not a not a straight up thriller at all. But it was such a surprise to me. And so this book was recommended to be by my buddy read partner, Roxxana, and she said, "Look, I just need you to listen to this book. I don't want you to look at anything about what it's about, just go into it and listen to it." And that was really, really, really good advice, because this book is really best done knowing very little. So all I'm going to tell you is that this The Devotion of Suspect X is a police procedural, sort of, and it's set in Japan. And it starts with a murder. And you know who committed the murder, and you know why they committed the murder. But that is all you need to know to get into this book. Y'all, this is so smart. This book is so smart. The entire time I was trying to figure out the resolution. And I did not have it. But as soon as I had it, it was like all the dominoes clicked into place in my head the moment that it had been revealed. And I was like, "It was there the whole time." So this book represents, again, that surprise element. I had no idea that a

Japanese police procedural would be one of my top 10 books of the year. But also, this book really just is so incredibly smart. And that's what was winning for me this year is books that really demanded that I pay close attention. And this book does that for sure. And yet, it's also still really, really readable. So if you love a literary mystery, this is one that you're going to want to pick up for sure I did it on audio, and I loved it that way. I think it was really, really well done in a great way to take this book in. So this is *The Devotion of Suspect X* by Keigo Higashino.

Kaytee Cobb 48:44

Hearing you talk about that and thinking back about what you said at the beginning of the show where you thought you were going to have a lot more literary fiction and not as many mystery thrillers, I wonder if these type of books are why you think that because you're picking smart mysteries instead of popcorn thrillers, you know, like on that mystery and thriller spectrum, you are much more literary than you have been in the past.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 49:06

Yeah, that could be. That definitely could be and choosing books, yeah, that are gonna demand a little bit more of my attention. I think coming out of year that I felt like I didn't have a lot that a lot of that to give. It felt like I had a new kind of reading wind at my back, which was great. So I do want to say that although Roxanna was the one who really pressed this book into my ears, for sure, it was bookish friend Holly Farrell, who had recommended it to me even months before that, so I want to definitely say that because she did say Meredith, I think this might be one for you.

Kaytee Cobb 49:38

Perfect. We love our bookish friends and they're great recommendations. Okay, my number four book for the year is *Amari and the Night Brothers* by B.B. Alston. This is my middle grade pick of the year. I talked about this one on episode 35 of Season Three. I am so happy that the Bookshelf Thomasville sent this to me as part of my Shelf Subscription because this book was everything. Amari Peters is the younger sister of Quinton, who is a total golden boy, adored by everyone in the world seemingly. However, when he goes missing, and the cops write it off as young Black boy attached to drugs, Amari is unwilling to accept that fate for her brother. Her search for answers leads her to a ticking briefcase, and then to a magical trial run by the Bureau of Supernatural Affairs. This is the magical school middle grade fantasy we've all been craving without any of the problematic author in the background. Amari is a heroine you love to root for and the end of this book left me full on salivating for the next one in the series which is due out in just a few weeks. I pre-ordered it from Blackwell's so I could get a signed copy and I cannot wait to get it into my hot little hands. This is *Amari and the Night Brothers* by B.B. Alston.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 50:56

And I will definitely cosign on this book. This is one of the first books for a long time that falls into that category of like *Nevermoor*, or even *Harry Potter*, like just that really well done middle grade fantasy. I loved this book.

Kaytee Cobb 51:12

I love it. Okay, what's your fourth book?

Meredith Monday Schwartz 51:15

Alright, my fourth book is not going to surprise anybody at all, but absolutely had to be on this list. This was another another place where I had two books vying for the same slot. But I've decided that I'm not going to put 56 Days in the slot because it was vying for the position here by Catherine Ryan Howard. Instead, I'm going to put her other juggernaut, The Nothing Man again by Catherine Ryan Howard into the slot as my number four book of the year. You guys know my love for Catherine Ryan Howard. I've now read all but one of the books in her canon, more of her books are going to be coming to the show in the coming months. I've loved them. The Nothing Man just edges out 56 Days as my absolute favorite by just a absolute hair. So just to remind you, and we've talked about The Nothing Man a lot. So really briefly, what we have in The Nothing Man is we have Eve Black, and when Eve Black was 12, she was the only member of her family to survive an encounter with a serial attacker, who was called The Nothing Man. Now Eve Black is an adult, and she is obsessed with finding the man who destroyed her life and killed her family. Meanwhile, supermarket security guard Jim Doyle has just started reading a book called The Nothing Man, the true crime memoir that Eve Black has written about her efforts to track down her family's killer. And as he turns each page, Jim is getting more and more angry, because he's not just interested in reading about The Nothing Man. He is Nothing Man. So basically, we in this five star mystery thriller, or what Catherine Ryan Howard would call an Irish crime fiction, which I think is a better description for it. We have two points of view that we go back and forth. We were with Eve Black as an adult. And then we are reading, we have three points of view. We've got Eve Black as an adult, we are reading the actual book, she has written the book within the book called The Nothing Man, which is my favorite true crime of the year. It was so well done as a book within a book. It was fiction, but it was like it's so meta, but I loved this book within a book. And then we also have Jim Doyle's point of view, as he is realizing that she's closer and closer to finding out who he is. So this book is absolute crime fiction perfection. It is exciting the entire way through, but it gives you lots of great character development. And it is absolutely to me what broke Catherine Ryan Howard out as a star, she's getting all kinds of new readers. She's gotten a ton of awards this year for 56 Days, which was fantastic. And I am just so so happy that we all have found Catherine Ryan Howard because she is just a rock star. And I do want to say that it was bookish friend Alison Downes who brought Catherine Ryan Howard and The Nothing Man to me initially. So Alison deserves a lot of credit because that one recommendation got an awful lot of balls rolling and we are really really grateful for it. So this is The Nothing Man by Catherine Ryan Howard.

Kaytee Cobb 54:36

And I will cosign that one hardcore as well. Meredith made me do it but she made everybody do it because it's fantastic.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 54:43

It's so it's so good. If you read it and you loved it and you have not read 56 Days, a lot of people ask me this question like "If I love The Nothing Man, which one of hers should I read next?" I've read all as I said, all but one and loved them but 56 Days is really very much right up there with The Nothing Man.

And those are her two most recent books. So I am so excited to see what she comes out with next. Yes. So let's do another intermission. Let's do another superlative category. Kaytee, this time we're talking about the book that surprised you the most in 2021.

Kaytee Cobb 55:22

Okay, this one is actually, for me, it's a book that surprised me because it was almost forced upon me. Okay. So okay, early in the year of 2021, the year of our Lord, we did an episode about genres we shy away from right? I mentioned that I do not want to read biography. I think it's boring. I want memoir. I want the personal connection. Right? That was episode 34 of Season Three. Because of that episode, Jessica Howard bookish friend Jessica convinced me to pick up *The Black Count* by Tom Reiss, because she was attempting to convince me that biography does not have to be boring. And I went into it like a teenager that has been asked to clean the bathroom. I was like, stomp walking toward this book. I was mad that I had to read it, right? And guess what? It was absolutely delightful. And we had the best discussions about it. We had a huge group of buddy readers. And at times, the chat made me laugh until I cried, I still have memes saved on my phone from that conversation because it was so lively, and scintillating and interesting. And it's a book written about the real Count of Monte Cristo. And it's, you know, and this guy lived 400 years ago, like, what how is this even possible? I loved it. It was so good. It's *The Black Count* by Tom Reese. And I just was shocked. I was so surprised.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 56:38

Well, I mean, I gotta say, this is another one that I'm co signing. I loved his book, too. I wasn't able to read it as fast as you guys were did when you read it, but I did end up finishing it. And I loved it, too. I thought it was, I liked biography though. And of course, he's the father of the author of one of my two favorite books of all time, so I was very interested. But it really does read like a very exciting novel more than anything, because this guy was, he seems very of our time.

Kaytee Cobb 57:09

Totally. I was shocked. I could not if I had to, like wind my jaw up off the floor, because I could not keep it closed. I was shocked.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 57:19

Yeah, he's really, really, really good. All right. So the book that most surprised me is actually a book that I have not yet gotten to bring to the big show. But there's just no question that there was no other book that would that I mean, a lot of books surprised me that but this one just blew me out of the water. And this was *Piranesi* by Susanna Clarke. This was another one that Roxanna, she didn't press it and she didn't say you absolutely well, no, I guess maybe she did. The more she read into it, she was like, "I really, really think you need to read this book." This book is high literary. Okay, so this book won a lot of very, very big prizes. This is one of those, you know, books that you think like, oh my gosh, your eyes just want to roll back in your head. Because it's one of those books that when you start it, it doesn't make a lot of sense about this guy who lives in this gigantic house. And he spends all of his days, like trying to map out this house that has all of these holes and these gigantic multi story high sculptures that are all white in this house. The house air quote "house" that he lives in, has its own tides and it has floods and it has sea life that lives in it and nothing makes any sense at all. But Roxanna said, "Just

keep reading." Keep reading. You guys, this book is shocking, because and I'm going to talk about it on the big show, but you have to hear about it now, because the reality is that it's billed as fantasy. And kind of from what I just said to you that that sort of makes sense, right? And guess what? Here's the surprise. Here's the non spoiler spoiler. It's not a fantasy novel. It's a murder mystery. It's a freakin straight up murder mystery. And nobody bothered to tell us Kaytee and it makes me so upset. It's very rude. Yes, it is so rude. That I feel like this tiny group of readers was kind of like holding this book in its arms like "This is our high literary fantasy. You know you can't have it." It's this little tiny book so it only took a couple of days to I mean you just want to flip the pages once you hit this one particular point, there is no going back because all of a sudden those dominoes are clicking into place. This book is fan freaking tastic. It is incredibly memorable. It is incredibly plot driven. It is smart. It is not difficult to understand. You do have to get into it, you do have to give yourself about 50 pages, which given the tiny book, that's not a small percentage of the book. But it's not going to take you a long time to get through that. But trust me, give it 50 pages. And when you get there, you will know. You'll know when you hit the point that I'm talking about. And you will be like, "Click. I'm in." It is absolutely fantastic. I am never going to forget Piranesi by Susanna Clarke.

Kaytee Cobb 1:00:28

Wow, dang. Another one. Oh, do I get it today? What do I do?

Meredith Monday Schwartz 1:00:35

Oh, this would be a perfect end of year book Kaytee because it's so short, right? It's so fast.

Kaytee Cobb 1:00:41

Okay, okay. Good to know.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 1:00:43

Yeah. And everybody who read it after I talked about it a little bit was like, Holy Hannah. I did not know. I saw this book because it's got this very memorable cover. I think we all thought it was like, circusy, Gods, or circusy or something. I'm telling you this book is, it's like it's been purposely hidden under a bushel. No. We're gonna let it shine, Kaytee, because this book is fantastic. It's so yes. And you it's the perfect one for the end of the year. Mindy. Okay, you know my Mindy, out Mindy?

Kaytee Cobb 1:01:15

Yes.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 1:01:16

She read it and absolutely loved it. This I'm telling you Piranesi do not sleep on Piranesi. It is fantastic. No more sleeping. Got it. Okay, excellent. So now here we are. We are at our top three books of 2021. Kaytee, what came in at number three?

Kaytee Cobb 1:01:33

Number three, for me is my top nonfiction of the year. And this was one, you know the same thing where I was like, wow, I've got to have a top nonfiction. This one again, I know not a lot of people are

going to be surprised. This is an anti-racism book. I've read some really great books in this genre this year. But I'm going with *How the Word is Passed* by Clint Smith, which I talked about most recently. This is very recent, on episode 19 of Season Four. So as I pondered over these selections, this one just kept moving further and further up the list until it landed here in spot number three. Clint Smith peels back the layers on slavery in a way that I have never read before. He takes us on a physical road trip type journey, while also allowing us into his very personal thoughts and feelings on an issue that closely touches his own life. As a poet, Clint Smith has a precision to his language that cannot be denied. He also has impeccably researched each of the locations on this journey. And he provides not just facts and data, but current and real world experiences that bring these locations to life. As I often love to do with nonfiction. I read this one on paper while he read it aloud to me in the audio version. Both are necessary here. You can hear the emotion in his voice as he reads the text aloud. But the paper in front of me allowed me to highlight and book mark and revisit powerful sentences. This book is my only antiracism book on my top 10 list for this year. And it's for good reason. It's *How the Word is Passed* by Clint Smith.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 1:03:03

This is another one that I feel just absolutely had to be on this list because I'm seeing it on, I feel like almost everyone who's read it is just completely blown out of the water by this book.

Kaytee Cobb 1:03:17

Right and I read it because again bookish friends they know what we need, right? Liz Hein and Sarah Dickinson came together in a concentrated effort to make sure that I put this book into my hands this year, and I'm so glad that they did.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 1:03:28

Alright, my third book is a book that I read all the way back in March. This was a pick four from the Indie Press List from Fabled. This is *We Begin at the End* by Chris Whitaker. Now, this book, I feel like over the course of the last several months, it has become very, very clear that this book is a really divisive book, right? So this book is one that you either absolutely love, or the writing style is just not for you. And I can see what people are talking about when they talk about the writing style not be for them. So not being for them. Okay, so basically, we are following the the characters that live in a small coastal town in California. And they are dealing with some ramifications of current day situations, but also ramifications from some events that have taken place a long time in their past. So what we're experiencing here is we're experiencing characters that are dealing with some really, really big themes. This is a literary mystery, and there is a mystery in it. But don't come for the mystery in this book. I think that that's where a lot of people, where their expectations aren't being met. This is really a book that is about a town and is about these characters and there are some unforgettable characters in this book. We've got the sheriff of the town whose name is Walk, he's just this, he is so well drawn You just know this character. And then of course we have Dutchess Radley, who is probably my most unforgettable character of all the books I read in the entire year. She is a young teenager who says that she's a modern day outlaw. But really, she's just a little girl that's trying to find her way for her and her brother amid some really tough circumstances. So, to me, yes, the writing style takes some getting used to, it's a little bit different than what we're used to. I always say with this book, give it 30 pages to let the writing

style kind of sort itself out in your head. If you get to the 30 page mark, and it's not working for you just set it down. It's totally okay. There might come a time in the future where it's going to be exactly right. But don't push past that point, because it's not going to get any easier from there. But if you find that it sorts itself out in your head, I found this to be one of the most unforgettable books that I read all year. It was very plot driven. But it was very, very deeply character driven. And I just felt like it explored some important themes really deeply and in ways that I could connect to. I just, I think it's an unforgettable mystery. So this is *We Begin at the End* by Chris Whitaker.

Kaytee Cobb 1:06:19

And that's another it's another very good literary mystery that, again, you have to you have to give yourself time to get into it.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 1:06:29

So right, right, it's not one that I would call a beach book because it really demands a little bit more of that and that yeah, that's that's a hallmark of my reading this year.

Kaytee Cobb 1:06:38

Yeah. Okay, top two.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 1:06:41

Top two. Alright, Kaytee, how did you, the top two slots are very, very hard oftentimes.

Kaytee Cobb 1:06:48

All right. My number two book for the year is *Razorblade Tears* by S.A. Cosby, which I brought to the show on episode two of Season Four. I just have like a list of adjectives I couldn't even write about it. I wrote, "Oh my hell. Unforgettable, violent, life changing, horrifying, incredible." So here's our setup. We've got two dads, Ike and Buddy Lee. Their sons are gay and married, and were murdered right at the beginning of this book before it even starts. While they as fathers have not always supported their sons, Ike and Buddy Lee both have a shady past, and they decide to seek vengeance. Ike is Black, Buddy Lee is white, and their granddaughter is their uniting force, because it seems like nothing else can bring them together. Through the course of this novel, these two learn from each other in the front seat of a pickup truck. They yearn to be better fathers to their sons in death than they were in life. And that leads them down a path of violence and vengeance. All that to say that this is not an easy read by any means. When I set it up on the big show, I mentioned guts and brain matter. And that is consistently something you will find in this book. But I will also say that picking it up on paper and skimming large swaths of violence will not leave you feeling puzzled at the end if that's something you have to do to make it through this book. The journey is worth the miles that takes to get there. This novel is tightly plotted, absolutely wonderfully done. And if it were only slightly less violent, I would be even more bossy and telling you that everyone should read it. Instead, I can get behind the fact that this is not a book for everyone, but it was one of my very favorite books this year. And if you can handle it even with a little bit of skimming, then I hope you will give it a chance. It is incredible. It's *Razorblade Tears* by S.A. Cosby.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 1:08:35

This is one that I'm holding back because I want to read it when it's really really fresh to me, but I just know this is when I'm very much looking forward to it. Just seems like that very high quality. Yeah, literary mystery for sure. Okay, well, to answer your question earlier was it hard for me? This was the hardest part of this list because the I knew for a long time what my top two books were of the year, but which order they were going to come in was really, really, really hard for me. And so I finally decided in a way that I'm feel very, very good about. So I'm going to say that my number two book of the year is Matrix by Lauren Groff. You guys heard me talk about this on the show at length with Mindy. Matrix is there's really not a lot to set up Matrix. It's a story of a woman who at 17 is kicked out of the Royal you know, the Royal Palace and basically sent to be the head of a nunnery. And then she lives there for her whole life. And it's in the 12th century and this is the book and who the heck would think that this book would be so excellent that it would be really hard for me not to name it my number one book of the year. Back to this element in this theme of surprise. I love Lauren Groff. I love Fates and Furies. That's one of my favorite books of all time, for sure. Matrix is not long. It's not super plot driven. As I said, there's not a lot of plot to it and yet you live a lifetime within these pages. And you know, a woman so deeply I feel like I know Marie de France, like she is my sibling. I mean, like she is just so clearly wrought in these pages. Lauren Groff's writing is just razor sharp and the way she describes things just brings tears to my eyes, even when I'm not, it's just so beautiful. So what I say about Matrix is, unlike State of Terror, or We Begin at the End, where I'm saying, hey, read X number of pages, if you read the first three paragraphs of Matrix and it does not just destroy you with how beautiful it is and make you want to keep reading, set it down. It's not for right now. This is not one that you need to read far into to know whether or not it's going to be for you. So that's kind of an upside, I think. I was three paragraphs in and I was in with both feet like someone had dropped me into this abbey in this 12th century countryside. I just, I had goose pimples the entire time I was reading it. It unearthed so many things to me about what it is to be a woman, to be a woman in leadership, to be a woman in leadership leading other women, and to be able to do things that the men and the structure around you say that you can't do, but to do it anyway, that's what this book is about and I loved it. This is Matrix by Lauren Groff.

Kaytee Cobb 1:11:47

While anyone who didn't listen to the first time you told us to read that, I can't imagine that they're not gonna listen this time.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 1:11:55

Well, I mean, again, not a book for everyone at all. And now one of those things, and, you know, I know that people know this when we say this, right? Like, when we talk about, like, not a book for everyone, we're not somehow saying that, like, well, it was a book for me, that makes me a better reader. It might not be. That's not it at all. It just means this is one of those books that feels like I could have picked it up. I mean, it just came out. But I could have picked it up, you know, five years ago and been like, oh, no, I just know what the heck. And then I picked it up just at the right time. So if you get into it, just and it isn't calling to you just set it down, because it might be perfect at some time in the future. So but it is, this is a divisive book, it is not for everyone. The moment that they open it up. This is not like A Project Hail Mary, that I feel like is just so good for almost everyone. Yeah.

Kaytee Cobb 1:12:47

Love it.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 1:12:49

Okay. All right. Kaytee, this means you are down to your top book of the year. The best book of 2021.

Kaytee Cobb 1:12:57

Do you know what it is Meredith?

Meredith Monday Schwartz 1:12:59

Well, no, cuz I actually thought *How the Word is Passed* was going to be your number one.

Kaytee Cobb 1:13:03

I think when I say it, you're gonna say "Oh, of course." Because I think I know what yours is, but I'm excited to see. So my number one book of 2021 is *All the Lonely People* by Mike Gayle.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 1:13:17

Yes, of course. Absolutely.

Kaytee Cobb 1:13:18

Yes. Okay. Yes. I talked about this when I cried about this on episode 12 of Season Four. I interviewed Mike Gayle, the first author interview I've done in almost a year at that point, because I, I could not let him go. I could not let go of Hubert Bird and Mike Gayle. He captured my heart not just through his novel, but through the interview, the minisode that I did with him afterward. Hubert Bird is an old age pensioner, a retiree in London who emigrated there decades ago as part of the Windrush generation. When we meet him, he's alone, and only grudgingly agrees to sign for his neighbours packages. But he's not the only lonely person in the world. He just doesn't know that. He's been pretending to have a social life for years now so that his daughter doesn't worry about him. When he finds out she's coming to visit, he realizes he has to manifest some friends and quick. As he tries to find humans to do life with. We also get to peel back the layers on his life to determine how he became the lonely person that he is. In my interview with Mike he mentioned that the idea for this book came from the idea of a home filling with people as someone marries and has children. And then the nest empties out through children growing up and a spouse passes away or divorce. Right? We see that happen all the time. Homes are empty and fill like lungs breathing with air. Hubert as a human is flawed and doesn't always make the best decisions, but he's also real, and the people that come into and leave his life are as fully drawn as he is. This story is found family and loneliness and connection and marriage and parenthood and loss and grief. And it will move even the hardest of hearts that left me absolutely bereft when I finished it, and I knew right at the moment that I hit the end that it would be my top book of the year. It's *All the Lonely People* by Mike Gayle.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 1:15:04

I think that is the perfect choice for you for your top book of the year. And that is another one like *Razorblade Tears* that I am so excited to read. And I want to pick up when it's fresh to me again, when

it's fresher, it'll be fresher for me to bring it to the show. Yeah. But also it feels like one of those books that I really want to carefully choose it at the right time, so that it can hit exactly right. I think it's just really important to make sure that you're in the perfect mood for that kind of book. Because what a great premise. What a smart premise he came up, right? It's not something that you see everywhere. But when you hear it, you're like, "Why isn't someone written that premise before? It's really interesting." Exactly.

Kaytee Cobb 1:15:45

Love it. Okay. All right.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 1:15:47

Good choice. All right. So yes, Kaytee, I am positive that you know, now what my number one book of the year is. And I decided to make this number one, because I felt like it was weird that it not be number one, when I had said, it is not only my number one book of 2021. But it is one of my top two books of all time. And that is, of course, A Gentleman in Moscow by my boyfriend, Amor Towles. And I just couldn't be prouder of him and this book that he's written. So this book absolutely fulfills my theme of the year, which is a surprise. This was another book that I buddy read with my buddy read partner Roxanna. We both were reading it, sort of because we felt like it was one of those books that so many people loved. But then a lot of other people didn't. And we just were like, "We want to find out what all the fuss is about one way or the other." And, man, we both thought we weren't gonna like it. We both really were just prepared not to like it. This book was such a revelation, I loved this book so much, I don't really need to set it up that much. You guys all know that A Gentleman in Moscow is about Count Rostov, who is a member of the Russian aristocracy. And then all of a sudden, it's not hip to be part of the aristocracy anymore. And so he's basically told, Look, instead of us killing you, in a firing range, we're going to let you go live in The Hotel Metropol for the rest of your life and if you leave, you are going to be taken to trial. But if you stay there, you can stay there and you'll be safe. So he's lives in this hotel. A lot like the Matrix and then that happens. And how the heck can that premise be not only my favorite book of the year, but my favorite book, my co-favorite with The Count of Monte Cristo is my favorite book of all time. And that is because this is a book about a character that you just have to love. The biggest surprise in A Gentleman in Moscow, of course, which I cried about, it's the only time I have ever cried talking about a book on the show in the four seasons that we've done it, and I cried, I think I was so filled with emotion, because it just makes me so angry, that everyone says that this book is character driven and slow and quiet. And it's just not. There's a lot that happens in this book. And I just was so surprised and excited and delighted to open it up and meet Count Rostov and all of the characters that we meet, because this book is all about found family and nobody told me that before. And why didn't they tell me that? And it's just absolutely perfection. I loved everything about this book. I cried when it was over not because it ends in a sad way, but because I was so sad it was over. And it has my heart start to finish, as does Amor Towles. So this is A Gentleman in Moscow by Amor Towles, my number one book of 2021. And of all time.

Kaytee Cobb 1:19:02

We both ended with our boyfriends. That's so great that we love our boyfriends so much.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 1:19:07

It's really nice. I mean, it's been a big upheaval of us leaving our husbands for these authors.

Kaytee Cobb 1:19:13

The heart wants what the heart wants. They've learned it's okay. They still love us.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 1:19:20

Right? All right. Well, Kaytee, that is it. We did it. We decided on our top ten books of 2021. We rose to the challenge.

Kaytee Cobb 1:19:28

We made it through the agony and the bad dreams and sleepless nights in order to come up with a list that we're both happy with.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 1:19:36

I am very very happy with Yeah, I think that your list is really indicative of your year and I think that my I think we did a really good job on this and hopefully, all of our listeners have been able to make theirs because here's here's the thing. I do think that if you can make your top 10 list of the year I think it's important because I think when you look back on all of your reading year as a whole it's really illuminating. And certainly, if you're using a reading tracker that enables you to do that, that makes it even easier. But even if what you've done is just make a note in your notes app or note in your notebook, look back and see if you can pull together your top 10. You don't have to post it, you don't have to do anything with it, other than maybe making a note for yourself. But I think you might be really pleasantly surprised. Or you might just be surprised at how the books that rose to the top for you. And I think that that makes it easier to make good choices moving forward. And that's really the biggest argument to put together this list each year.

Kaytee Cobb 1:20:35

I completely agree. I think it tells us so much about who we are as a reader, and it gives us that little snapshot that we see can change year by year. You're talking about surprises over and over again and if you hadn't been taking stock on a yearly basis, maybe you wouldn't have been surprised this year because you wouldn't have known any different. So I think it is really a useful exercise for us as readers.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 1:20:57

Right for everyone. For every reader to do this. I think it's a great idea. All right, that is it for this week. As reminder, here's where you can connect with us. You can find me I'm Meredith at @Meredith.reads on Instagram.

Kaytee Cobb 1:21:09

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

Meredith Monday Schwartz 1:21:13

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 1:21:23

You can also follow the show at [@currentlyreadingpodcast](https://www.instagram.com/currentlyreadingpodcast) on Instagram or email us at currentlyreadingpodcast@gmail.com.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 1:21:30

And if you really want to help us or if you just want 100 more episodes of bonus content because you love listening to us talk about books, become a patron supporter for just \$5 a month. You also can help us by shouting us out on social media and rating and reviewing us on Apple podcasts. All of those things make a huge difference in our being able to find our perfect audience.

Kaytee Cobb 1:21:55

Yes, bookish friends are the best friends. Thanks for doing that and helping us grow and get closer to our goals.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 1:22:01

Alright, until next week. Happy reading Kaytee.

Kaytee Cobb 1:22:03

Happy reading Meredith.