



Season 4, Episode 23: Front and Backlist Beauties + Factors That Affect a Reading Experience

Mon, 1/17 • 51:04

Kaytee Cobb 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 already know, we don't shy away from having strong opinions, so be ready.

Mindy Brouse 00:21

We're light on the chit chat, heavy on the book talk and our descriptions will always be spoiler free, and ad free, thanks to the Patreon supporters.

Kaytee Cobb 00:29

Our bookish friends make the podcast happen when they spend five bucks a month on Patreon and get tons of bonus content and bookish community in return.

Mindy Brouse 00:37

Today, we'll discuss our current reads, a bookish deep dive and then we'll press books into your hands.

Kaytee Cobb 00:43

I'm Kaytee Cobb, a homeschooling mom of four living in New Mexico and there are definitely outside factors that affect my ratings.

Mindy Brouse 00:49

And I'm Mindy Brouse, mom to seven, homeschooling and reading in the mountains of New Mexico and I love when my husband asked to turn up the audio book speed while were buddy listening to Murderbot. This is episode number 23 of season four and we're so glad you're here.

Kaytee Cobb 01:03

Mindy, does that mean that Paul is now just listening faster or that he's so excited about Murderbot he cannot listen at regular speed?

Mindy Brouse 01:10

He's just listening faster and it's so great because he gave me such grief about it. But I keep walking into the kitchen and he's doing some work in there, whatever he has his audiobook on and it is so fast. And I don't say a word because they used to be like, "Oh, Mom, you're listening to [sped up noises]",

and I was like, "Haha, hilarious", and now he's doing it. I just kind of pat myself on the back converted him. Yeah, lovely.

Kaytee Cobb 01:34

I love it. Mindy, I'm so glad you were able to step in today. As we know, Meredith did test positive for COVID today. She's posted about it on her Instagram. She's very anxious about having COVID. But she's also done everything right up to this point. It's not a failure. It's just what happens, right? We're all just kind of fighting against this virus that it seems is going to just take everyone down at some point. However, she can rest firmly in the fact that she has done everything right and it probably will just end up being a bad cold for her. But she feels like poop today.

Mindy Brouse 02:04

Yes she does and we just love her so much. And you know, it's a pandemic. It's called a pandemic, because we're probably all gonna either get super, super close to it or experience it. So exactly. So I'm glad to step in to help.

Kaytee Cobb 02:17

For that reason, I mean, Mindy had like two hours to prepare for this episode, y'all. And she was like, "Absolutely, I'm ready when you are." So just thank you, Mindy. Alright, just want to let y'all know at the top of the show here that today for a deep dive, we're gonna be talking about the things that affect our star ratings and make them go up or down. So I give bonus stars for or I deduct half a star for I'm really excited. Like once I started preparing for this one, I got really excited to talk about it with you, Mindy. Are you excited?

Mindy Brouse 02:18

I'm excited. Plus, this is kind of up your spreadsheet alley to like, yeah, so I can see you're kind of glowing as we get ready for this.

Kaytee Cobb 02:51

I am. But before we get started with that, let's start the way we always do, which is with our bookish moments of the week, what have you got for us Mindy?

Mindy Brouse 02:58

Well, my bookish moment of the week is kind of like I've gotten to travel to places I've been wanting to go. I got to go to England, I got to go to Yukon, Georgia, North Carolina, all sorts of places via a Zoom with Mindy bookmark that some friends received, and I've been waiting for them to get them and then they started arriving across the pond or across the mountains to UConn and sharing them on Instagram. And I was just giddy because gift giving is like my love language. I love it so much. So seeing them get their bookmarks and be excited and then being able to look at those 12 books that we got to talk about together. It was just a reminder of some really precious friendships and discussions, and some really terrific books this past year. So it's been fun seeing those land, it's been very bookish.

Kaytee Cobb 03:47

It's been fun for me to watch those land as well. I love seeing people get to open those. And then they're so excited that you made them. It's like a little library card that has the dates you guys had your discussions and then the title of the book. So it looks like a library card like stamped out numbers. Oh my gosh, you did such a good job of making them. Go over to Mindy's Instagram, y'all and check out what she made because I guarantee you're gonna want one. You're gonna sign up for every Zoom with Mindy just so you can maybe run the chance of getting one next year because they're so cute.

Mindy Brouse 04:14

Thanks, Kaytee. Okay, what about you? What is your bookish moment of the week?

Kaytee Cobb 04:17

Okay, my bookish moment of the week still goes back to Christmas this week, but it's like playing out now. So one of the things that Santa put in my stocking this year was a book light. It's nothing exceptional. It's not like the Lamborghini of book lights or like like some super fancy thing, but it's making me stupid happy. I can sit on the couch with all my people and not have to turn on you know all the dining room lights or sit apart from them. So I have a light behind me but still be able to see the pages of my paper books so we can be you know, watching a show that maybe I'm not that interested in. But I'm still snuggled up with my kids on the couch. We're still all sitting there together. And I think that it will really help me achieve a bonus mini goal this year of upping my paper books again. Like you talked about, I'm obsessed with spreadsheets. I read a little over 30% of books on paper last year, which was up from 26%, the year before, but I love reading paper books. And I would love to see that number go up. And I think this will help make space for that in my regular reading and evening routine.

Mindy Brouse 05:16

I love that. I can picture you sitting there with your light.

Kaytee Cobb 05:19

You know, especially if it's a movie I've seen before. Like if we're doing another Star Wars marathon, it's okay, I can sink into my story.

Mindy Brouse 05:26

I love that. Fantastic. Although I do want to know what the Lamborghini book light is now, so

Kaytee Cobb 05:31

Oh, well, I'll have Megan put it in the show notes. It's a legitimate thing. It's called the Lamborghini of book lights.

Mindy Brouse 05:37

I can't wait now. Fantastic.

Kaytee Cobb 05:38

And I don't even think it's that expensive. It's like \$25 Maybe, but it's, it's like double headed. Now it sounds like... let's talk about current reads. Mindy, what have you got for us? What's your first book this week?

Mindy Brouse 05:50

Kaytee, I have three backlist beauties for us today. You guys know I love backlist for accessibility. And these three need more people finding them. And I'm super excited to be able to be on this show today and share them. So my first book is one that I found via bookish friend, which is a pretty common theme here, on Instagram this time and I picked it up because of the National Parks focus, but it made it to my top 21 of 2021 because of the writing. This is Dear Bob and Sue by Matt and Karen Smith. This book is an under the radar gem of a find, Kaytee. Matt and Karen are, they're a married couple and they decided in 2010 that after spending 28 years raising kids, which is sounding a little familiar, they're going to quit their jobs and visit all of the US National Parks. So they did. They wrote their best friends, whose stories of traveling to national parks with their kids inspired this trip. They wrote these best friends consistently all during their trip. So every national park, Bob and Sue got a letter so I know that this may sound dull. This may sound like it doesn't sound like it could be something that would be worthy of a top list, but y'all it is not boring. I laughed so much reading this book that my kids kept asking what was wrong, or wanted to hear the story. And I was like, "No, I can't, you know, too much, too much backstory. I'm not telling. You can read the book." And I felt like I was with them. Their sense of humor and their personalities really shine through not only in these letters, but in how they view their experiences and, this is the part that cinched it for me, each other, on these road trips. If you have a partner, or bestie, who sees adventures differently than you and I'm putting adventures in quotation marks here. Let's say that they call taking a wrong trail that they promised you was a shortcut after checking a map, but actually it added five miles in time being lost and then you had to hitchhike to the Grand Canyon's rim and back and they don't call that scary like you do but they call it an adventure and they think it's hilarious. Well, this book might be for you if you live the difference in road trip traveler, travel with eye rolling, glaring, constant comments of what the what are you doing? And you'd like to tell your best friend back at home the ridiculousness that your partner's doing? This book's gonna feel like home. And it did for me, Kaytee. Well, this isn't anywhere near Hamnet level of writing. Okay. I thoroughly enjoy a book that brings me joy, helps me feel seen, makes me laugh, has me reading sections aloud to my husband and encourages connections with those we love as well as nature. So I think this is another "All Gen" book like I shared in the minisode meeting. Anyone can giggle at this. I know people have read it aloud to their kids or their grandkids and have a hoot of a time. It's very, very fun. Pick this one up and enjoy yourself. That is Dear Bob and Sue by Matt and Karen Smith.

Kaytee Cobb 09:00

That is so fun. I love a travel log book. I, of course know that you love national parks. I also love the National Parks and I can actually picture exactly the stories you're talking about and the ways that you have told them to me about your own adventures. So I can see how this was just the perfect fit for you.

Mindy Brouse 09:15

And I did it on audio because they read it and I feel like that really nails it. But I did pick up the paper book for only \$4. So if you want to do that too. Kaytee, tell me your first. I mean, I'm eager.

Kaytee Cobb 09:29

My first one this week is called CeCe Rios and the Desert of Souls by Kaela Rivera. I found this book when bookish friend Linda Perkins shared about it in the Mighty Networks group. I'm going to take a little aside here. Mighty Networks is formatted quite a bit like Facebook but doesn't come with your uncle's ex wife's profile on it. You're only connected to the single network of people, not the entire planet. So this group is smaller than our Facebook group of bookish friends. But it is as the name suggests, quite mighty. And people who don't like Facebook are welcome join us over there as bookish friends. Her review is great so I'm actually going to pull from what Linda said about this that got me so excited to pick it up. She said, "If the opening scene doesn't scare the daylights out of you, buckle down for a debut middle grade fantasy that will." In a town dedicated to the Sun God and symbolized by flames, fire, opals and radiant energy, 12 year old CeCe feels like a misfit. Empathetic, reserved and prone to tears, she feels more affinity for oceans, lakes and watery elements so she doesn't fit in. While searching for CeCe when she's out past curfew, older Sister Juana is abducted by the monstrous El sombrero a criatura which is a desert creature known as the Bride Stealer. Here's what you need to know about this. From my little point of view. If you've been binge watching Encanto on repeat like we have, Juana is basically Isabella. She's always perfect. She's always beautiful, right? Everybody loves her. She basically has flowers growing wherever she goes. So, like Amari in Amari and the Night Brothers, CeCe sets out to rescue her sibling. Instead of a futuristic universe of astounding technology, CeCe ventures into a forbidding desert landscape in which cruel brujas force enslaved creatures to combat like gladiators in tournaments. To rescue Juana, tenderhearted CeCe must compete in the deadly competitions, her animal companions against their ferocious criaturas. As she struggles, CeCe discovers her unique talents and grows to accept her differentness. Rich in Mesoamerican imagery and legend, the narrative weaves Spanish words seamlessly into the nonstop action, and CeCe's gradual self acceptance. As CeCe would say, "Holy sunset", and that's all from Linda. Doesn't she do a good job of setting up a book?

Mindy Brouse 11:44

Yes, I love it. I actually just added it to your spreadsheet.

Kaytee Cobb 11:48

Perfect. I love it. So if you guys were intrigued by The Accidental Apprentice by Amanda Foody that I talked about last month, because of the bonding with otherworldly creatures, this is a great next one to pick up. It's definitely got some scary and dark scenes so I'd say upper middle grade for this one, like 11 and up. But it's a great story, and I'm really looking forward to more from this author. This is CeCe Rios and the Desert of Souls by Kaela Rivera.

Mindy Brouse 12:12

That sounds fantastic, and also leads into my next one perfectly so excellent. That makes me happy. I know and love when it all falls together. Like totally.

Kaytee Cobb 12:24

Alright, tell us about that book Mindy.

Mindy Brouse 12:26

All right Kaytee. This book is one that I thought I knew when I was getting into, a story of immigration, a Mexican American adventure story with definitely I could tell there was either a little quirk or just a little something unusual. But no, I was completely off kilter with this book. And this book is *Into the Beautiful North* by Luis Alberto Urrea. Katie Sikkes chose this one for our Zoom January talk, which she is Co-hosting and it sounded fascinating. Okay, so this is the summary that got me in. 19 year old Nayeli decides to travel to the US to recruit her own Magnificent Seven to help her small town that is being taken over by banditos because all the men have gone to America. It's just women, children and older men. That sounds fun, right? So she's like, "I'm gonna go get some men to come defend my town". Also quirky. Right? Okay. But Kaytee, as you know, because you have also read this, we find more than just a little bit of court care. I want to say right off the bat, I wasn't sure that it was okay that I was cracking up so often while reading. I was worried. I was like, am I being racist? Am I being stereotypical that these scenes are absolutely hilarious, and the descriptions are almost cartoon like, Stacey, I stole your line on that. And hilarity and this sass is very strong. I had to phone a friend to get my bearings because I was like, "Is this supposed to be like this? I'm worried I'm reading this wrong." and she assured me "No, this is all intentional. It's very funny". So once I settled into that, I felt better. So Nayeli does not only go on this trip, but she recruits three friends to join her. Her gay boss Tacho, who is bravely out as gay in a macho culture and has pro level sarcasm skills and top notch cooking and fashion comment. Her besties, Yolo and Vampi who each have their own unusual personalities going on shining through, these four board a bus headed to America to come back with a team of fighters for their little tiny town. Y'all, in terrible and funny ways things go wrong. Urrea tackles the topic of immigration and nationalism in the funniest ways, while also having our characters experience really awful events. Kaytee, I was reminded actually of *JoJo Rabbit*, have you seen that movie? Well, I was reminded of that movie and how humor is used to show the truth about terrible things. And we're drawn in by the people and we are off a little bit because we're laughing. And we're like, "Wait, should I be laughing? Should I not be laughing? What's going on here?" But a brilliant writer can do that to us. Urrea has serious skill in doing this. And not every author can pull it off, Kaytee. Just like when watching that movie, I felt like laughing was inappropriate. But it's not. You're going to laugh a lot in this book. You're pulling for this most ridiculous band of people. I haven't even touched on the mayor back in Mexico, and her quirks and her things going on. There's just a lot of hilarity here. It is very fun, all while experiencing a journey to America and then through America and back to Mexico. I loved it. It's different and fun. I highly suggest picking this one up. This is *Into the Beautiful North* by Luis Alberto Urrea.

Kaytee Cobb 16:09

I love that one. It reminded me a lot of *We Are Not From Here* by Jenny Torres Sanchez, which I read not too far away from this one, except that one was a lot heavier. It didn't have that fun quirkiness to it even though that one is definitely billed as YA and this one you could probably shell as YA as well. You probably could. It just it didn't have that same lightness and fun. Especially if someone has already

picked up that first one and they're like, "I've already read that story.", this is just such a fun, even though the cover does not look fun.

Mindy Brouse 16:41

The cover is lame, we need to redo that. Yeah. So we'll be happy to submit artwork for that. Katie also suggested that if you've read American Dirt, this is a good alternative. Yes. And so I can't agree more with the idea if you want to get a better look, because Urrea is Mexican American so he brings a beautiful voice into this, of getting to talk about American and Mexican culture. Super, super fun. So and the language in here also is a lot of Spanish. And I thought of you when I was reading it, because I was like, "I don't know what they just said. But I wish I did. And I wish I could call Kaytee and ask her to interpret for me", but in audio, I will. I really do think this one is best done in audio because of the characters and all the Spanish it's really really awesome. Is that how you did it?

Kaytee Cobb 17:32

I believe I did listen to this one on audio. Yeah. Okay. Okay. And I loved it. And it's just like with CeCe Rios where it is just seamlessly woven in. Luis is not playing to the white gaze here. He's not saying you know, "... and then we went in the carro, which is car just so you all know", like, he's not playing that game.

Mindy Brouse 17:52

So, no, it's very natural. I liked it. Alright, what is your second read Kaytee?

Kaytee Cobb 17:58

Okay, so my second one also plays a little bit with language. It's called Lost and Found by Kathryn Schulz. Elizabeth Barnhill from Fabled in Waco, Texas, pressed this one directly into my hands and I'm so glad she did. We considered it for the January Indie Press List, but ultimately passed on it. And I'm going to talk a little bit about why I did still read it. So here's the setup. It's nonfiction, so it's not a real setup, but it's kind of. 18 months prior to Kathryn's father passing away, she met the woman that she would marry. As a side note here, Kathryn is the wife to Casey Cep, who wrote Furious Hours that Meredith talked about many, many episodes ago, like years ago at this point. In this memoir, she's weaving together those stories, the losing of her father, the finding of her wife. In the last section, she talks about the actual words behind losing someone. Why do we say we lost someone when they die? What does grief look like and feel like before and after an actual death. It's the stories of a father and his daughter and the ways they love each other and the ways that she loses him. Because it's not one big loss. It's over and over again through little interactions, right? And then we move into the found section, when she talks about falling in love about what that heart skips a beat feeling actually means when it's put to paper about weaving together two lives into one life. And finally, we enter the end section, which is weird, in which we're losing and finding at the same time. Again, these two relationships were opening and closing at nearly the same moment in Catherine's life. Her prose is exacting and lyrical, it really brings you into her story in a wonderful way. But here's why we had to pass on it for the Indie Press List. Not only does nonfiction traditionally not sell very well, we still add it sometimes, but not very often because usually we're sticking with the better selling fiction picks. This book is 256 pages. So it's not long, but it's only three chapters. It's a lost chapter, a found chapter and

an and chapter, like 100 pages, 100 pages and 50 pages. Y'all long chapters are hard to read, right? You're like either you're finishing this book in three settings, or you're feeling like you're always trying to push against, like, when am I gonna get to another section break. So it's a slower read that just kind of gently pulls you forward rather than feeling like you want to be immersed in this world and really stick with it. That doesn't mean it's not the perfect book for the right reader. But for the bookish friends as a conglomerate, I think it would have been a much smaller sale pick. All that being said, I finished this book as a galley, immediately contacted my local indie and pre-ordered the hard copy for my mom's birthday, which was last week in real time. But after we're recording this episode, the way she puts this book together, I know it'll be a perfect fit for my own mom, and I can't wait to press it into her hands with a big Happy Birthday grin. So thanks to Elizabeth for pressing it into mine. It's Lost and Found by Kathryn Schulz.

Mindy Brouse 18:56

That's really interesting that then editor didn't fix that three chapter issue.

Kaytee Cobb 20:35

Seriously, it could have been like section breaks with plenty of chapters in sight and no reason to have formatted it like that.

Mindy Brouse 20:58

I mean, editors know that nonfiction is hard to sell anyway, so you'd think they'd be like, so let's at least fix this.

Kaytee Cobb 21:04

I just think it would have been way more accessible if it had been broken up differently. And maybe it will be in the final finished copy. Again, I've read the galley. So maybe they will have made a different decision by the time it actually releases, which would be great. All right, what have you got for your third book, Mindy?

Mindy Brouse 21:20

My last current read is a YA novel by Jeff Zentner, who I did mention in the minisode for In the Wild Light that made my top 10. And I still love that book. But this one is where it started for me with Zentner's writing and I read this book this year, too, and adored it. This is The Serpent King by Jeff Zentner. This title may make you think of sci-fi or fantasy, right? Like the title definitely sounds like that. But it's not. This novel is set in a modern a small town in Tennessee, with three high school best friends, Dill, Lydia, and Travis. Their relationships are the carrier for the transformations and lessons we watch them experience and for which we are not the same after reading. We have three misfits, who have different goals as well as different struggles for in high school and after, but who support each other lovingly and in beautiful ways that are just so unique and wonderful. Zentner really knows how to write teen friendships, Kaytee, and make us love those kids versus like rolling our eyes at them and being like, "Why are you making this decision?" And then we're like, alright, because 16 year olds make dumb decisions. Their brains aren't fully cooked, right? Correct. He knows how to do this in a way that we are rooting for them and we're not rolling our eyes. Travis is trying to live a bit in a fantasy world and

retreating to online relationships after losing his brother in Afghanistan. Lydia is a big social media fashion guru who is stuck in a little Podunk small town. Dill, he's our guy here. Dill's father is a central force in this poor, small town. He's a man who still considers himself a pastor though he's in jail for child pornography is not a good person. And not only does he still consider himself a pastor, but a powerful quote "man of God", who teaches his faithful followers to hold snakes, drink poison and speak in tongues. Hence the Serpent King title. Okay, so sneaky. Yes, his influence and power on Dill is a force that we can feel and we struggle with as he does. It is amazing writing. Lest you think this is a religious book only for religious people or faith or something, I want to say that Zentner fully captures what it's like to struggle with what you've been taught, and what you are choosing to believe. He does it with a very gentle hand while making our hearts ache for these kids. This is truly a really beautiful story Kaytee. I've talked to many people who have read it. I feel like more need to read it though because it is just needs more love. Because it's so well done. This is The Serpent King by Jeff Zentner.

Kaytee Cobb 24:05

Okay, but of the two that you've talked about recently, you are going to recommend that I start with In the Wild Light?

Mindy Brouse 24:11

No, I would like I would want you to start here.

Kaytee Cobb 24:13

Interesting. Yes, I know. I've had you and Angela both pushing hard on me to get some Jeff Zentner in my life.

Mindy Brouse 24:21

I think readers should start with this one because there's easter eggs in In the Wild Light that he doesn't necessarily. And that makes it even more fun because you can feel the connection to both books. But yeah, Jeff is a master at writing southern literature. without it feeling super southern, if that makes sense. It's really really good. Yeah.

Kaytee Cobb 24:39

Okay, my third one, Mindy, is one that I know that you have read and I'm excited to talk to you about it because I think you and I had a very similar experience reading this one. It's A Hell of a Book by Jason Mott. All righty. A big nod from Mindy here. Okay. This book was the National Book Award winner for 2021 and over and over again, I saw the exact same reviews, probably because I like to keep people around me that are similar to me. I don't really understand what I read in this book, but I think I liked it. Correct, right. Pretty much everyone, that's exactly what they say, yes. That's exactly how I felt about it. Many of us just went along for the ride. And I insist and in capital letters, I INSIST that if you pick it up, you just let this author take you where he wants to go. That's the only way to read this book. I agree. You've got a Black author setting out on a cross country tour to promote his best selling novel, which is called Hell of a Book, which everybody talks about, "Oh my gosh, he wrote a hell of a book. Oh, haha, it's a hell of a book," like you're the first person to make that joke. Get the hell Oh, my gosh, that's...

Mindy Brouse 25:38

Surrounded by middle schoolers who think they're their first one to come up with a joke.

Kaytee Cobb 25:41

Exactly. So while he's on tour, we also start learning about an unfolding, the story of Soot, a young Black boy, a very dark skinned Black boy, living in a rural town, and The Kid and I'm putting those in capitals in my voice, right? The Kid, a child that accompanies the author on his tour, although the author's not sure if he's real, or if he's just imagining him. This book is a little magical realism, mixed with heartbreak and current events. There's a police shooting of a young kid playing on the news as the author goes from one interview to the next. So they'll be like, after this, we're going to talk to the author of Hell of a Book, and they've just talked about this young Black boy being shot, right? Are they connected to Soot or The Kid, we have to peel back the layers on this story and find out just as he does. This is not Jason Mott's first book but it is by far his most highly rated. It feels very applicable to exactly right now, even though your feet feel like they're on like a balance board the entire time, and you're just trying to find your footing. Mindy, how did you feel about this book overall?

Mindy Brouse 26:44

I kept saying, "I think I really want to say I liked this, but I did feel like what what did I just read?". Right? And because I don't like to not know what I'm supposed to be doing for that long in a book, I'm uncomfortable pressing it into anyone's hands right now. Because I'm still even after what, it's been a month or two, since I've read it, that I mean, I think I was messaging you because you had read it already? Or maybe it was Liz. I was like,

Kaytee Cobb 27:11

No, you read it first.

Mindy Brouse 27:12

Okay, so it was Liz, I was like, "Liz, am I supposed to know what's going on right now?" And she's like, "You're not." Okay. Okay. Because I didn't want to feel like an idiot. But Kaytee, I did like it a lot. And I do feel like it is worth reading. But I'm going to agree with you in the sense that if you pick it up, then commit and just finish it. This is not a DNF book, I don't think because, and you know, I'm a fan of DNF. Right? We all are. But this one is so unusual. And you don't really get your bearings until almost the end. And so if you quit for that, then you're missing out on what the author is actually intentionally doing for this entire book.

Kaytee Cobb 27:53

I completely agree with you that if you quit halfway through, you didn't get what he was trying to do with this book. And it's really interesting. And it's really well done. And I think that's what makes it a great choice for the National Book Award, right? Because it's a book that's doing interesting things with the written word. It's not just another novel, right?

Mindy Brouse 28:12

Yeah. I mean, it was brilliant. So it's definitely a brilliant read. Brilliant.

Kaytee Cobb 28:17

I keep thinking about it now, you know, two months later after reading it, so I gave it four stars at the time because of that off kilter feeling the whole way through, but I still keep thinking about it. So I ended up like, moving up my list throughout the years. I was like, wow, that was really interesting.

Mindy Brouse 28:33

That's exactly what's happened to me. Like, after I finished I was like, is this three or four. But I was like, I think four. Okay, but then as it's gone, this is one of those books that I'm going to reread. Because I know, knowing the end, I've already experienced the ride that he wanted us to have. And I valued it. So now I can do it again and pick up on the things that maybe I missed because I was so uncomfortable the first read and appreciate this book even more.

Kaytee Cobb 29:01

Yeah, I think that's a great idea. I think we should both reread it and we can pack it together.

Mindy Brouse 29:05

That's a good idea. And we can we don't have to send messages like "Am I in the right book?"

Kaytee Cobb 29:10

Exactly. "Did I skip three chapters on accident? I don't know what's happening." All right. So this one was Hell of a Book by Jason Mott, National Book Award winner for 2021.

Mindy Brouse 29:19

Right. Great book to bring. I'm glad you brought that to the show.

Kaytee Cobb 29:22

Well, once I knew I was getting to record with you. I had to put it in here. Perfect. Okay, those were our six current reads. Which means now we get to get into our deep dive, which I'm very excited about. It's the things that affect our star ratings. I do want to point out that this was an idea from at @Katie.lovesbooks on Instagram. She sent us this idea. So I'm excited to get to talk to you about it today. Mindy, what are some things that affect your star ratings? Do you have things that consistently make you detract stars or consistently make you add stars if you find them in a book or just make you feel a little different about the book because of those?

Mindy Brouse 29:59

Yeah, so I guess first thing is if the book is titled Lord of the Flies, it gets a negative 10 star rating. I mean, that's just kind of automatic. So that's my first first step.

Kaytee Cobb 30:10

What if it's compared to Lord of the Flies?

Mindy Brouse 30:12

Oh, well, then I'm not picking it up. Then I'm throwing it just out of spite and I won't pick it up except to throw it. So after that's alright, so full disclosure, Kaytee, I don't rate books most of the time. I just don't like to. It's a combination of my people pleasing thing and my fear of being wrong. Like someone's gonna look at my stars and be like, "Well, that's wrong." And I'll be like, "Why?" and those two combined and lead to complete indecisiveness on my part. And I know that's ridiculous. I'm just saying it. But as I was prepping, I was like, you know, I bet there are other people who struggle with this for the same reasons and so I want you to know, this chat is still for you. Because there's a lot to glean here. Whether you officially rate something with stars or not. So fellow non raters join me, stay in. This is gonna be fun.

Kaytee Cobb 31:06

So what consistently impacts your reading experience in a negative way, when you find it in a book?

Kaytee Cobb 31:12

Yes. Although I think a lot of our thriller reader listeners will disagree with you.

Mindy Brouse 31:12

Alright, so a book that brings a bunch of shock and awe kind of moments is what I call them that are jolting or jarring from the storyline. And an author was like, "Look at this amazing, shocking thing that just happened." I'm like, "You know, stop it." No, I can maybe tolerate one of those. Okay, maybe but in general, I don't want a lot of that because to me, it jars me out of it being a quote, "real experience" in my mind, and then all of a sudden, it's something on paper. Does that make sense?

Mindy Brouse 31:15

Oh, but I love thrillers, but I love thrillers. They just have to be...

Kaytee Cobb 31:49

You just don't want like a red herring.

Mindy Brouse 31:51

Correct. It needs to be surprising and jaw dropping. Yes, please. I love those moments. But if they're so unrealistically out of the blue that it's more jarring than surprising then I'm like, "Oh, you wanted to be unusual there. Wow, you did." So now I don't feel like I'm in the moment anymore. I'm looking at you side eye author. Stop it. So that's the first one right there. Next. I don't want something super pretentious for pretentiousness sake. I like smart books. You know I do. Yeah. Do I read as many of them as some of our bookish friends? I do not because I enjoy different types of escapism in my reading. That's a healthy I'm gonna I'm gonna go with healthy is 100% healthy. My therapist and I can talk about healthy. Yeah, healthy escapism. Yeah, we're going with that. I like to immerse myself with joy in a book. And so if the author has decided to be pretentious, because they think that's how good writing is, then I'm like, "Yeah, peace out." No, I'm not either I'll DNF or it will detract, it'll definitely detract stars. That's just not enjoyable for me. So those are the two right off the bat. I mean, three Lord of the Flies is an obvious one, but the other two are a little bit more nuanced for me.

Kaytee Cobb 33:03

Perfect. The first one that I thought of for like minus immediately, I will take off a half star right off the bat and I do use star ratings, if lying is the main plot driver. Hate I hate it. It usually takes off a half star even if the character is justified in their actions. This happens a lot in YA books, but it happens in adult books too, when it's revolving usually around affairs, right, and Meredith and I are the same. We don't want to read affairs in our books, right? You don't like affairs in your books.

Mindy Brouse 33:32

I won't even pick them up if that's on the cover jacket. Right? All right. Nope.

Kaytee Cobb 33:36

Exactly. So the the YA book not about an affair that most recently came to mind for this, for me was Charming as a Verb by Ben Phillipe. This is about a kid trying to get into college and he does something that just made me mad, and if I'm sitting there mad at your main character, even if what their actions are is justifiable, I can't get behind it. I can't get behind, especially handing our teenagers books that say, Well, I mean, even if it went poorly for them, you know, one option here would be to lie.

Mindy Brouse 34:11

Like no, that should not be an option.

Kaytee Cobb 34:14

Okay, here's another one that might be a little more controversial: overhype from people I trust. Okay, so too many people telling me at once that this will be a perfect book for me this happened again recently with Frankie and Bug by Gayle Forman, which I'm very excited to read, but I have to let it sit because I'm worried that within one week having like four people messaged me individually to say, "Kaytee oh my gosh, Kaytee, you're gonna love this book." I'm like, "Oh, now I can't read it."

Mindy Brouse 34:43

I am I rolling my eyeballs at you ma'am,

Kaytee Cobb 34:45

It's because I'll go in with unrealistic expectations. And then you know, you know that this is exactly what's happening with These Silent Woods as well right now. I know y'all love it. I know you're excited about it. I am 97% sure that I will love it. I cannot read it right now. I cannot.

Mindy Brouse 35:02

I love that, but I definitely see you and Meredith both doing that. You're both like, "No, now I'm gonna have to take out the star". So now, I just don't tell you to read books. I'm like, "She's gonna find out."

Kaytee Cobb 35:15

On the flip side of that is that if one person tells me "Kaytee, this is gonna be perfect for you," add to TBR immediately. Once I get 2,3,4 messages? I can't do it anymore. I have to wait.

Mindy Brouse 35:26

I feel like I need a funnel. I need to be the bouncer. Maybe I can be your messages bouncer and be like, "Oh, sorry, I can't let you in. Somebody's already send her that. Sorry. Trust me, you do not want to send this message. Turn around."

Kaytee Cobb 35:38

Perfect. Okay. And then my third one is a lull in the middle that made me want to not pick it up for a period of time or bad writing, of course, all of this lack of an editor, right? These can apply even if a book was a hit overall for me. If I had to, like slog through 15% of it in order to get to the part that was a hit for me, oh, man. Sorry, taking off a half star to a star for that.

Mindy Brouse 36:03

Okay, Kaytee, I'm gonna agree with you on that one. And that applied to me with Cloud Cuckoo Land. And I tried to read that on audio, and was like, "Where the hell am I? What is going on here?" And I want to say something that applies here. I can take off stars or half stars for audiobooks in areas that I probably wouldn't take off in paper. But you know what? Too bad, so sad, Sallie Mae. You're the one that made this audio book the way you made it, and you had a choice on how to do this or not. And so if you don't give me any kind of good clear section change and so I'm thrown off about "Wait, we're where? We're in Constantinople?" That book was nutty in that way, and I had to finally put it down, pick it up on paper, but then guess what took 18 years to read. So you know, that's, that's also some negatives. But you reminded me of another one that I will take off for, and that is when an author throws in, like a sex scene, or some kind of sexual something. And this really applies to the shock and awe moments again, but I just want to be clear, like that doesn't really contribute to the story or their character line, they're just doing it to be like, "Hey, I want to be able to say I wrote a book with a sex scene" or something. I'm like, nope, minus half star, maybe more for you, no. That again, is I want my story to feel real. And something like that is all said, and all of a sudden, no, we're having sex. No, wait, what?

Kaytee Cobb 37:36

Does it matter if it's open door or closed door sex scene? I'm talking about if there's an author writing a story, and then all of a sudden, there's like a random romance playing out that doesn't contribute to the story but but it's closed door. Does that matter?

Mindy Brouse 37:49

Yeah, that's a good point. That is less star removal. Yeah. That might be

Kaytee Cobb 37:55

Smaller percentage deduction, right?

Mindy Brouse 37:58

The American judge would give just a little bit of star removal for that. But if it's a full blown open door, yeah, there's gonna be serious star removal.

Kaytee Cobb 38:07

All right. I gotcha. Let's swing up here. We love a swing up. Let's talk about what makes us automatically rate a book higher or have a better reading experience because of these things in a book. What's the first thing that comes to mind?

Mindy Brouse 38:20

It has to have a good ending. I mean, I guess that plays into you will automatically get star removal if your ending is lame or it didn't feel like a clear ending. I'm okay with weird endings kind of like Leave the World Behind. I actually love that ending. But it needs to feel like you actually wrote an ending versus all of a sudden, you stopped writing?

Kaytee Cobb 38:42

Does it have to have a tidy bow? You can have loose ends?

Mindy Brouse 38:45

Yes, but you will get bonus star if it has redemption. If it has redemption, you're going to automatically get stars for that, because that's my jam and I want to know that we saw a character come full circle or find healing. Yes, please. You will get good stars for that.

Kaytee Cobb 39:05

Whatever. Okay, you know what the very first thing that came to mind for me was and I think you are going to agree with me this Mindy, buddy reading. Half star bonus automatically, right? If I can sit down and talk about a book with someone else, whether it's in messages or with like a Zoom at the end of the reading experience, anything where I get to be in community talking about a book? Yes. A half star. Even if it's a terrible book.

Mindy Brouse 39:28

Agreed. Yes, I do fully support that star usage. Now, I will say though, if it's just a brief chat and messages or something, it doesn't have the same boost. But if I get to really talk about it, and whatever format is doable for the group, oh yeah. Because it just enhances it. I feel like oh, yeah, of course, you're going to get more stars because the book is better now. Right?

Kaytee Cobb 39:54

Right. Because you brought everybody else's experience into it. What's something else that bumps a star up for you or a half star or percentage?

Mindy Brouse 40:01

If a book is one that I can feel like I can hand almost anyone, that's gonna increase its stars for sure because I like a book that is accessible for many people. That is a huge deal for me.

Kaytee Cobb 40:16

What did you dub those books?

Mindy Brouse 40:17

All Gen. Yeah, that's an All Gen book. And if I can hand it to anyone, yes, please. Yeah, then you feel like you're sharing with more people. And you know me, the more at the party the better. Bring all my friends over to my house. So I love when I can do that. Now, there are some I mean, like you and I and Razorblade Tears. That is a five star book for me. There's no doubt. It's violent. It cusses like crazy, which, you know, I just laughed at. I was like, "Could this cuss more? No, it could not."

Kaytee Cobb 40:48

It could. You need to read Nothing to See Here by Kevin Wilson.

Mindy Brouse 40:51

Oh, geez. Okay. Well, that's good to know what to avoid. But I can't hand this to just anyone because of those things. And I mean, it is a hard read. But it didn't remove. Does that make sense? So it's not going to remove if I can't hand it to anybody, but you will definitely get stars if I feel like I can.

Kaytee Cobb 41:11

But if it had been a four and a half star book that you then could hand to anyone, it would have become a five star.

Mindy Brouse 41:17

Correct, Kaytee. You're onto my math. Exactly. All right.

Kaytee Cobb 41:20

I love it. So another one for me is I know that I've got something special when I'm trying to shove a book into any spare moment. If I guzzled it down and took it with me to take out the trash downstairs, like I held a trash bag and carried the book down the stairs, and then opened the door and threw the trash away and was holding my book the whole time or if I took it with me to use the restroom, and like tried to manage that without ever using the same hand to hold my book and the toilet paper, it gets a bonus half star for that because that means that's a book that I couldn't even set on the counter for two minutes to do something I definitely needed to do.

Mindy Brouse 41:54

Right? Yeah, like it's mandatory. You can't just not do it.

Kaytee Cobb 41:57

Exactly. So that's, that's a bonus half star because there's something happening in that book that I cannot walk away from.

Mindy Brouse 42:03

I affirm you on that one also. And you saw that happen with All the Lonely People. I actually had guests arrive for a party and I literally there's a picture of me hiding on the floor by my bed so that no one could find me because I only had what was it like 12 minutes left. And you don't just stop that ending. So I

was like, "Kaytee, I have guests that just arrived. But I can't put this down." Yeah, that is at least half a star up if not more. Agreed. If you can't set it down for mandatory, necessary bodily function activities, or guests arriving at your house, that's a good sign of a book.

Kaytee Cobb 42:49

Okay, I've got one more that you're not going to agree with me on? All right. Yeah. My other one is romance plus. So it's a steamy romance that keeps me going, gets me going and I'm excited to read it, but it also tackles something deeper, like a disability or the patriarchy, or race relations, right, where there's some other element that makes it Plus. It's a little more than a romance. That extra element that will boost a romance in my rating system as well.

Mindy Brouse 43:19

Well, that ties into my last one. If it has good representation for disability and people with disabilities, it's going to start off with at least two stars, and then go from there, if not more, because I find it so rare, especially if it has Down Syndrome, or some other disabilities that aren't written about as much. But if it has good representation, and has characters not stereotyped for disabilities, yes, please. You're going to go up my star rating on that one.

Kaytee Cobb 43:52

I love that. I actually I can say, because my spreadsheets that I have seen that play out regularly, in my ratings, because I can look at... the spreadsheet breaks down books based on whether they have a protagonist that's disabled or an author that's disabled, versus an able bodied protagonist or author. And I can see regularly that that one side is always a little higher, right? And same with people of color. Same with LGBT. Regularly, I find that that impacts my reading experience in a positive way to be reading in a way that opens up my mind heart, body, soul, whatever it is, right? Yes. So and being able to like statistically see that is really cool.

Mindy Brouse 44:40

This is so great Kaytee, cuz I keep thinking of more and more so we're just gonna have to stop but yeah, this is good. There's lots of other things that affect our our view of the book, right and how we rate it. Yeah.

Kaytee Cobb 44:51

And of course, the plot, the setting, though, right? All of that really matters. The characters, they all matter, but we are encouraging you, listen, take a look at your own reading. What is it that can enhance your experience of a book, even to the point that it pushes your star rating one way or the other? So I think that's just really interesting to think about in your own head. You know?

Mindy Brouse 45:13

I think so too. I'd love to hear from listeners about that. Yeah.

Kaytee Cobb 45:16

So thanks for sharing your thoughts about that with me, Mindy.

Mindy Brouse 45:19

Thank you, Kaytee. And I think we brought something to this discussion even for those of us who try to avoid star ratings anyway. It's a good, good discussion to have with your own self.

Kaytee Cobb 45:28

Perfect. Let's talk about some five star books. Let's do it. Or non rated books that you really enjoy. What is something that you would like to press into our listeners hands today?

Mindy Brouse 45:39

I'm pressing another book that made my top 21 and 21. This is Your House Will Pay by Steph Cha.

Kaytee Cobb 45:45

Oh, I didn't know you read this one.

Mindy Brouse 45:47

Oh my gosh, I love this book so much. And I think this quote from her site best says why I love this novel. "With Your House Will Pay Steph Cha has taken a dark moment in Los Angeles's violent history and cracked it wide open, creating a prism of understanding of the pull of generational violence and its enduring devastation, but also the power of human grace against all odds. It's a touching portrait of two families bound together by a split second decision that tore a hole through an entire city." - Attica Locke, author of Bluebird Bluebird, which is another press on the Currently Reading press list that nailed it. And once I read that, I was like, well, crud, now I can't write what I want to say because I just want to say that I am made for books that bring redemption like we talked about just a minute ago and those where the theme of grace for others is strong. Always. This one stood out this past year, Kaytee, because the amazing nuance that Cha brought me in the Korean American culture, and the African American culture mixing, as well as clashing. There are moments in this book that are sketched into my memory, and I felt that pain and the struggles of Grace Park and Shawn Matthews as they navigate a violent episode, that also brings up past pains and violence. This book will leave a lot for your heart and mind. And I think that makes it a very perfect press. That is Your House Will Pay by Steph Cha.

Kaytee Cobb 47:18

I love that. I adored that book also. And it's hard to say that about a book that has some violence in it. It has some really tough family stuff in it, but it was just really well done.

Mindy Brouse 47:28

Really, really was. All right, what's your press?

Kaytee Cobb 47:30

Excellent. Okay, mine is also a little a little heavy. I'm going to press finally, We Were the Lucky Ones by Georgia Hunter. The first time I really considered picking up this book was when I listened to the debut episode of Sarah's Bookshelves Live. Sarah went to school with Georgia Hunter. So she was her very first interview on the show and it really left space for both of them to shine brightly. Sarah is an

incredible interviewer and Georgia's answers made me desperate to read this one. I went back to look and Sarah released that episode on January 2 of 2019. And I had finished the book by the 23rd of that same month. So I had it right away, right. We start out in the spring of 1939 when the Kirk family, a Jewish family living in Poland is trying to live life as usual, but it quickly becomes evident that it will no longer be possible. The family is flung to the far corners of the world. One sibling into exile, one attempts to flee the European continent, and others struggle to escape certain death. They each have an unwavering will to survive and yet they may also never see each other again, much of this sounds like a typical World War Two novel, but let me tell you what friends, Georgia Hunter based this stunning historical fiction on her own family's personal stories during World War Two. So while it's billed as a novel, that's because she added setting description and dialogue that she couldn't have known, but the sequence of events, it's real, and it's hopeful, and it's heartbreaking and it's everything in between. Here's my Goodreads review. "This book was phenomenal. And to think all came from passed down family stories. This author sat chatting with her grandma one day and these stories started to spill out. Not just about grandma and grandpa but the entire family and their time in Poland during World War Two. The Lucky Ones indeed." This is unforgettable, but fair warning, tears abound. Read it especially if you liked Beneath A Scarlet Sky by Mark T Sullivan, or The Lilac Girls by Martha Hall Kelly. This one is We Were the Lucky Ones by Georgia Hunter.

Mindy Brouse 48:45

That's been on my TBR for so long and now you've just forced it up the list. If you can put a World War Two book on a press list, you know I'm reading it.

Kaytee Cobb 49:39

I know and you know I have to like space some way out because we get so burnt out on World War Two but this is a true gem.

Mindy Brouse 49:44

Well just your description reminds me of Code Name Helene in a sense that you know that was true also but also a novel which you know, I smooch that novel so much so I'm gonna have to pick this up.

Kaytee Cobb 49:58

Alrighty that is it for this week. As a reminder, here's where you can connect with us. You can find me Kaytee at @notesonbookmarks on Instagram, and Meredith is at @Meredith.reads.

Mindy Brouse 50:07

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

Kaytee Cobb 50:10

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 them can be found at our website at currentlyreadingpodcast.com.

Mindy Brouse 50:19

You can also contact us directly at @currentlyreadingpodcast on Instagram or via email at currentlyreadingpodcast@gmail.com.

Kaytee Cobb 50:28

And if you really want to help us become a patron for five bucks a month. You get so much bonus content and great bookish community. Rate and review us on Apple podcasts or shout us out on social media. It'll make a huge difference in our being able to find the perfect audience.

Mindy Brouse 50:41

Yes, bookish friends are the best friends. All of those things are helping us grow and get closer to our goals. Thank you for doing that.

Kaytee Cobb 50:48

Until next week. Happy reading Mindy.

Mindy Brouse 50:51

Happy reading Kaytee