



# Season 3, Episode 27: A Bit of Disagreement + Character-Driven vs. Plot-Driven

Mon, 2/15 • 48:51

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 00:10

Hey readers, welcome to the Currently Reading podcast. We are bookish best friends who spend time every week talking about the books that we've read recently. And as you know, and especially this week, we won't shy away from strong opinions. So get yourself ready.

**Kaytee Cobb** 00:26

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

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 00:35

I'm Meredith Monday Schwartz, a mom of four and full time CEO living in Austin, Texas. And great bookish debates are my favorite.

**Kaytee Cobb** 00:43

And I'm Kaytee Cobb, a homeschooling mom of four living in New Mexico. And I'm willing to try almost any book. This is episode number 27 of season three, and we're so glad you're here. I have a feeling I know what's coming today Meredith.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 00:57

Yes, I think your feeling might be right. And I will say about your bite size intro, it's one of my favorite things about you that you really are game to try almost any book in any genre. There's really nothing that you shy away from or say no, that's 100% not for me. And I really I think I benefit from that. And I think we all benefit from that.

**Kaytee Cobb** 01:17

Well, thanks, Meredith.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 01:18

Yeah, you're a wide ranging reader, Kaytee. Before we get going on this, we are so so happy to welcome in a lot of new listeners who maybe found us through our guests when we had Laura Tremaine on, and also when we had Gretchen Rubin on, we are so grateful to have gained some new listeners. And we want you guys to know that our show is a little bit different in that we do not have any advertisers all the way through, all we will do is talk about books. So this week, what we want to encourage everyone to do is follow us on Instagram. We talked about the fact that one of our goals is to

hit 10,000 followers, and get that swipe up. And you guys, we are getting close. We are marching our way there. We're at, last time we looked, what about 86 8700? Katie?

**Kaytee Cobb** 02:04

Yeah, exactly.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 02:05

Alright, so if you don't already follow us on Instagram, just follow us because there's some great content there. And also, you'll help us get the swipe up. Alright. Let's get into the fact that later on in the show, we are going to really kind of dip in a little bit to one of the great bookish debates, Katie, we are going to talk about plot driven books versus character driven books. What are they? Where do we land on them? And, you know, is each reader, you know, kind of devoted to one or the other? Or can we like both. So we're gonna dip into that great bookish debate later on in the show. But before we get there, let's talk about our bookish moments of the week. Katie, what have you got for us?

**Kaytee Cobb** 02:49

Okay, last night, I got to attend a panel discussion with the editors and a few of the contributors to the brand new release 400 Souls, which is put together by Ibram X. Kendi and Keisha N. Blain. They used 90 contributors to write about African American history for various perspectives. So 400 years of African American History, each contributor only writes about five years. I'm so excited to pick up this book, because each chunk is only like this little bit, you know, I'm going to buddy read it with a few friends and I heard that the audio book has a lot of narrators, including including Leslie Odom Jr. which, haha, yay, I'm so excited. So I'm just like, I don't know if I've ever been as excited about a history book before. But last night's talk just got me really fired up about it. I'm very stoked. And it was put on by the National Civil Rights Museum. And I'm just really grateful that there's such great programming even while we're all stuck at home and with COVID. So not with COVID. I don't have COVID again, during the pandemic.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 03:50

Right, right. Yes, I have seen the book everywhere. And I read about the structure and the way that they're, they put it together and it looks so interesting. So so interesting. All right, good. So my bookish moment of the week was I was thinking about the fact that one of the great new habits that we've put into place I talked about with Gretchen Rubin, which is a great moment for me is that we are Johnny and Jackson and I, Jackson is my nine year old son, we are spending some time every night about 20 minutes every night reading all of us together in the same room. And this has been a habit that we have put into place just a couple weeks ago. Because you know all the reasons why people do this. And the longer we do it, the more we're really enjoying it. There's definitely something about reading together at the same time in the same room. And I realized as I was thinking through that I've gotten lots of DMs from people who've asked me different questions about it. And I realized that the reason I kind of got thinking that I wanted to do more of that was because of Bookend Homeschoolers, which is the podcast that's done by one of our co-hosts, Mindy Brouse. And I mean, a lot of people would be like, Meredith, why are you listening to a homeschooling podcast? Because it's actually a lot more than that. The show is really, really well done. Anybody who is interested in things related to exposing your children to as much knowledge as possible, whether they are, like my son distance learning right now, ways to really do that really well I've gotten from the show. As well as just a lot of things having to do with how to

incorporate more reading amongst our family as a whole. So I've been really, really inspired. I definitely recommend if you guys aren't listening to Bookend Homeschoolers, because you think "I'm not a homeschooler", give a couple episodes a try. They really, really have given me a ton of ideas that I've put into place already. So that was my bookish moment to the week. I just I love that podcast. Alright, Kaytee, what is your first current read?

**Kaytee Cobb 05:58**

Okay, my first book this week is a collection of short stories, which I don't typically love. But it's called *The Secret Lives of Church Ladies* by Deesha Philyaw. This is probably my favorite collection of short stories I've ever read, which, even though I don't love them, I picked them up more than you might think. And this one just knocked it out of the park. It's only nine stories. And it's so hard for me to even look at this collection and be like, this one's my favorite and this one's my least favorite, because they're all really powerful. You know how in *Leave the World Behind*, Rumaan Alam takes three pages to give us that grocery list, that grocery shopping trip. And with just those details, you know that person? This is exactly what Deesha does. She takes one little scene, and you're like, oh, I have such a read on these two people and exactly what's happening between them. And that's how she starts every single one of her stories where you're, it's not like you're trying to figure out what's going on and your feet are under you, you're like you know exactly who she's talking about. You can picture them in your head, you know, without, like you and I don't picture people very well. But you know, what's happening in the story. And she just makes you feel totally fleshed out in that short period of time. So I listened to this one on Hoopla. So if you want it from your library, you can probably get it right away. And I listened to only one story a day. So I could sit with each one instead of just bingeing through it. And I do think that's the way to go. There is, you know, it's the secret lives of church ladies. That's the common thread through this collection. There are secrets. There are quote unquote "scandals", there's tasty food, there's some sex, there's some arguments. There's some LGBTQ representation as well. So know that before you pick it up. But it is I'm so impressed because this other this author has one other book, she wrote *Co-Parenting 101* with her ex husband, about how to co-parent kids after divorce. So nonfiction parenting book, to this amazing collection of short stories that I could not put down cannot stop thinking about. It's *The Secret Lives of Church Ladies* by Deesha Philyaw.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz 08:04**

That sounds really good. I think that's one of my favorite things when authors can nail that piece of in really, really short amount of text. You just you've nailed that part. You know exactly who that person is. I think Liane Moriarty is one of those authors that I feel does that really, really, really well. So that sounds like a great collection. Okay, my first book also is a little bit out of the ordinary for me, because it's a memoir. I know that that's gonna shock you. But it's a business related memoir, which is definitely my sweet spot for for memoir, not not yours, Katie. I read *Uncanny Valley* by Anna Wiener. This book was really really, really interesting. It's, you know, a nonfiction it's her memoir about basically in her mid 20s. And Wiener, she's broke. She's a millennial who is of course looking for meaning in her work. And she's has a job in book publishing, which, when I read the book, I heard the job she had before actually sounded pretty great. But she moves from New York to San Francisco or the Bay Area, where she lands at a big data startup right in the heart of Silicon Valley. And that world she entered in in her mid 20s is so well drawn in this book for all of its extravagance. She works for a couple of different startups, and you really see their kind of, like, dubious success. And you get you get a really strong sense of the

painfully young, mostly male founders, who are just hell bent on domination, and making money. And of course, doing good and trying to do both of those things at the same time, because they're positive it can be done. Spoiler alert, it's hard. And they of course, you know, they all want to be making this like millennial idea of progress. So, Anna takes us on this journey through working at each of these and each one has tons of problems, they think they're saving the world, they think they're going to make billions of dollars doing it. But every.. her story, and every juicy bit of it shows us the way that these big bright upsides have huge dark downsides in Silicon Valley. And it just draws Silicon Valley in its awkward teenage years, really, really well. So I enjoyed the heck of this book, the heck out of this book. In fact, I read it in an afternoon. And I, one of the most fun parts of it is that she writes about all of these places in really juicy detail, like she spills the tea. But she had to sign NDAs, for everything that she did. So she has to be... both places she worked, and then she kind of takes that to all the places that she references because she meets a lot of people or hears a lot of stories. So she sort of mentions them in enough detail that most of the time, I mean, I'm from the San Francisco Bay Area. So most of the time, I knew what she was talking about. But there were a few times I had to go Google to kind of figure out, you know, the company or the founder that she was talking about, but it's definitely out there. And if you read Uncanny Valley, and you Google, you know, uncanny valley, and then kind of the little blip of text it, all of this stuff will come up because people have done all of this research already. So you can figure out exactly who she's talking about. So if you like anything related to you know, business and how they are run, or how they're built, this would definitely be for you, if you like workplace details. Again, that's something I like in my reading, plenty of that here. Really, really interesting. What I liked most is that Anna comes to all of this with an opinion. But she doesn't write the book with an agenda. And I feel like that was not an easy line to walk because she has opinions about how women are treated in tech or the kind of bro, you know, attitudes that are out there all of these things. But she really walks the line between letting us know where she lies on the issue, but not banging us over the head with how we need to feel about it. And I feel like that was very, very interesting. So I loved this book, I thought it was really great. And I have to say I don't.. I love living here in Austin. So I don't spend a lot of time feeling homesick for California. But when I read this book, I really felt a lot of homesickness for California and how beautiful it is. There's so many land you know so many places that she talked about that I was like I've been there I worked there I you know, have lunch there, I missed this restaurant. And it made me a little bit homesick for Northern California. But that's Uncanny Valley by Anna Wiener.

**Kaytee Cobb** 12:49

So my second book this week is Love Lettering by Kate Clayborn. And I had to say it very clearly because this book gets confused a lot with a book that Meredith really hated last year, and people confused them. And so I figured it was time for me to read this one and kind of clear the air a little.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 13:10

Right, I have not read this one.

**Kaytee Cobb** 13:12

Correct. So this one we have our main character is Meg, and she is a hand lettering artist who's kind of up and coming in the craft world. She's trying to get her feet under her. And right at the beginning of the story she's making like making ends meet by making wedding invitations that are hand lettered. She secretly likes to leave messages into the hand lettering and nobody has ever noticed before. But Reid's

marriage dissolves a year after she makes this invitation for him and his fiancée. So he tracks Meg down to see why she put a certain secret message into his invitation. And if she could tell something about him and his fiancée when she did so. Turns out Reid is very, like almost Autism Spectrum obsessed with patterns. He's very smart. He's very on top of it, like mathematically business wise. And he picked up on it right away. So he's a perfectionist. Meg is trying to figure out you know, they don't really hit it off. It's kind of enemies to lovers or at least like disgruntled customer to bad business owner, I guess is kind of the the situation here. But Meg is up against a deadline to try and really get her feet under her crafting wise. And so she kind of enlists Reid to help her look at her business from the outside and give her some ideas because he's so straight laced. He's so perfectionist, he can see patterns, right? So they end up doing kind of walking tours of New York City while she talks out loud about her business ideas. That part of my book, this book, not my book is my favorite. They're walking around New York City, they're looking at hand lettered signs, and that's when they start to kind of open up to each other kind of like when you talked about A Court of Mist and Fury and the way that that relationship develops over the course of the novel, how it starts as a friendship. This one starts as a really great friendship. But it is a romance so you can tell where it's gonna go from there. I thought it was pretty tame overall, I had heard really good things about it on the internet so I was expecting for it to blow my socks off. But as I wrote on Goodreads, it only ruffled them slightly. It was fine. It was overall fine. I liked it. But it's definitely not one that you would throw against the wall. If you were thinking of the one that Meredith had read last year. This one is Love Lettering by Kate Clayborn.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 15:36

Just ruffled your socks a little bit. All right, Kaytee, we are we are going to tackle this next book.

**Kaytee Cobb** 15:41

I'm ready.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 15:42

We have to. We're gonna do it. Alright. I have a lot of thoughts. I want to talk about one of the most hyped books of 2020. I want to talk about The Guest List by Lucy Foley. First let me give you the setup. Here's what here's what Amazon how Amazon sets this up. On an island off the coast of Ireland guests gathered to celebrate two people joining their lives together as one. The groom is handsome and charming, a rising television star. The bride is smart and ambitious. She's a magazine publisher. It's a wedding for a magazine or for a celebrity. It's got the designer dress, the remote location, the luxe party favors, as the champagne is popped and the festivities begin, resentments come to surface. The groomsmen begin the drinking game from their high school days, the bridesmaid not so accidentally ruins her dress, and the bride's oldest male friend gives them an uncomfortably caring toast. And then someone turns up dead. It's got a great premise, right? It's got all the stuff that we're looking for. It's got super interested and actually, I really liked Lucy Foley's first book..

**Kaytee Cobb** 16:56

The Hunting Party.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 16:58

Thank you. Because it had a great sense of place. So I jumped into this one super excited, because that's something that I you know, I really enjoy in my mysteries. This one though, I liked the Hunting Party, this one, I just, I really didn't just dislike it. I was this is one of those books and it happens every now and then where I it's so... it offends me in the way that it that it was written. It offends me that it was Goodreads' number one mystery and thriller of 2020. I mean, that makes me so sad that this book was the number This was our best offering. Right, which I don't believe, by the way that at all was,

**Kaytee Cobb** 17:46

which is wrong.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 17:49

There was no one in this book, not only who was likable, and I can hear everyone saying, well, Meredith, why do you have to like, okay, you don't, I don't have to like all my characters at all. But I do have to be given some ability to understand their motivations in some way, shape, or form. And this book, just from the start, just pound you over the head with these archetypes of who these characters are with no nuance whatsoever. My notes actually say they were just toxic zombies staggering around half conscious, looking for who they could psychologically injure just to make themselves better. And every single person in the book falls into this category. Right? And I know that it's written this way, because everyone I mean, the setup, even you know, pretty much tells us everyone's a suspect. So you're supposed to believe that everyone on this island is capable of murder. And it's one thing if you can actually demonstrate that through quality writing. But that's not what happens here. And that at the core of why I was so hyped up reading this was because there was absolutely no effort to convince us as to why these people might have the motivations that they have. It was like this book was banged out, it felt like it was banged out by like a hyper emotional 17 year old over the course of a weekend, and then just shoved into the hands of the publisher, given a super evocative cover, and boom, we're all supposed to just assume that this is a good thriller. And this is really what bothers me is that it didn't have to be this way. I mean, the Hunting Party is a much, much better book. It's, at least in that book, there, sure there are a lot of hateful characters in that book, but there's at least some effort to draw them enough that we can understand what their motivations are. You're not rooting for them. But here, it's like you just have one hateful person after another hateful person. And there's no there's no puzzle to solve at all. We're not even a little bit allowed to play along, I don't even know if she knew who we she was gonna make the killer at the end, it was like, she just threw a bunch of note cards in the air caught one, and that was who that was, and then she wrote the last two chapters. So this book pushed all of my buttons, because of the fact that it was so like, so completely ignoring any nuance. And it was just, here's what happened. Let me tell you who this person is. And here's what happened in little, it's just be done. That's exactly how it felt to me. And it, we can do better than this. Right? So this book to me was exactly like 2020, it was simultaneously sinister and dull. And both are best taken out back and shot. So this is The Guest List by Lucy Foley.

**Kaytee Cobb** 20:52

Okay, so you hinted at the beginning that we were probably going to disagree about this, right? This was your bite size intro was a little hint at that. So I gave this book four stars on Goodreads. But I did not write anything in my review, which either means that I just clicked off four stars. and was like, I don't

know, whatever. Or it means that I wasn't really sure about my reading, I will say, I listened to this book, it has a full cast, that always makes the experience better for me, because I have a voice to associate with each person. I found the experience enjoyable enough to keep listening I because of what you're saying. I didn't know who to expect at the end. So I was surprised. Like, oh, okay, that's how this ends. Interesting. But I completely understand all your grievances about it. There's definitely no one likable. I agree with that. 100%.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 21:45

Right, no one likeable and but again, if you're gonna people your book with a bunch of unlikable characters, at least give me more about them to make me understand how they arrived at this place. It was also just like, again, we talked about this a little bit last week, it was all very tell, tell tell, there was no effort to show us who that person was. Because that takes more effort to do. Right, it's a lot easier to just have literally in several of these cases, the characters literally kind of breaking the fourth wall to just tell, well, this is the kind of person that I am. And I'm like, Oh my gosh, that is so lazy. That is so lazy, as a as a you know, for a writer to do. But I will say that I know I'm very, very aware that there are a lot of people who obviously have the majority of people read this book and really liked it. And I have heard many, many times that people have said that the audio version of it, if you're going to do it is the best way to do it. And maybe it's done in such a way that the hearing the voices may add some nuance that weren't there on the page. I'm open to the fact that that might be true. You know, again, this book definitely hit me the wrong way. Everyone though, is entitled to her own opinion, and her own very strident opinion. So if you loved it, I'm so glad that you loved it because anytime someone reads a book that they love, that makes me really really happy. I'm not at all telling people not to pick it up because it clearly was a hit for a lot of people. But for me, it it just kind of ground against a lot of these things that that really get my hackles up.

**Kaytee Cobb** 23:32

I think that's fair. Yeah. I think that's okay to say yeah,

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 23:37

This one really really got me going. Okay, what is your next book Katie?

**Kaytee Cobb** 23:41

Okay, I'm bringing us up then. My third book this week is A Song of Wraiths and Ruin by Roseanne A. Brown which is part of the YA title generator I assume because we have that like a noun of noun of noun right. So this book we're gonna chalk it up to Kaytee was seduced by the cover and rightfully so make sure you go look at it if you have not seen it. We have two main characters. Karina is the Princess of Ziran. Her mother is assassinated right at the beginning of this book. So that's the queen. She keeps it a secret and finds a spell that is supposed to resurrect people from the dead. Turns out to make this spell work, she needs the heart of a king the literal you know, tear the heart out of its chest of a king. So she has to find a king. Luckily, of course, because this is a book, there's a festival that is happening in Ziran. It's called the Solstasia Festival. It's beginning the next day. It's kind of Gladiator like a little bit Hunger Games a little Triwizard Tournament. Competitors come from all over the kingdom to compete to win honor for their area for the coming year. This year, Karina intends to make

the victor king so that she can then kill him and tear his heart out of his chest and resurrect her dead mother. That's the setup for this book. Right?

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 24:58

Got it, okay.

**Kaytee Cobb** 24:59

Our other main character is Malik. His sister has been abducted by an evil spirit. In return, that spirit demands the death of who do you think? Princess Karina, of course, because that's the way this book goes. So this is the first and a duology, which you definitely will want the rest of when you finish, it doesn't necessarily end feeling like, oh my gosh, we didn't even finish the Solstasia festival. What are we going to do now where you're like mad at the author, it does tie up some loose ends, but you know, there's going to be another one and you're excited to get to the next one. So know that going in. I, I would highly recommend this book for anybody who liked the Children of Blood and Bone series. There's a lot of very similar African mythology, fantasy elements and such. I'll also add that I listened to this one as well on audio, and I did like it the whole way through, but I did not like the male narrator, I thought his voice was whiny. And so I would probably tell you to pick it up in paper, if you're going to pick it up. Because the male narrator did not enhance the experience for me at all. I was annoyed with him the entire time. However, the characters themselves independent of the narration, were fantastic. The way the plot moved was amazing. The way that this festival plays out the the champions have to go through these different challenges. And the way that those are put together is really compelling. Could not put it down. I was very excited the entire way through listening to this story, except when Malik was talking. So this book is not just a pretty cover, not just pretty on the outside, it's great on the inside as well. It's a Song of Wraiths and Ruin by Roseanne A. Brown. And the sequel comes out in August. And it's a Psalm of Storms and Silence. So we're gonna keep that title thing going.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 26:47

Man, it sounds really, really good. And don't you wish that you could give it another title? Just because with YA fantasy, now they've gone hard toward that. Just like thrillers have gone hard toward wife, daughter, you know, and all of that. So yeah, like, oh, it would be so good if it just had a totally different title. So, yes, but it sounds like a really good one. Okay. All right. So for my third book, I actually in real time read this right after I finished reading The Guest List. And I was so glad that I did because it was the palate cleanser, the redemption, in excellent writing that I really, really needed. And this book had been on my shelf for years. I read Before the Fall by Noah Hawley.

**Kaytee Cobb** 27:34

Oh, good.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 27:34

I'd had this on my shelf since I want to say before I was even on What Should I Read Next? So like, I think this was a book that I actually heard about in one of the very first couple of episodes of What Should I Read Next, we're talking years and years ago. So I picked this up. I really liked it. So and it's so funny, because there are gonna be so many people that are mad at me, Kaytee for what I said about The Guest List because they loved it. And there are gonna be so many people who are mad at me



because I love this book, because I know a lot of people didn't like it. It was like a polarizing book. Okay, so just to refresh your memories, here's what the setup is. And it's got one of those premises that you'll remember as soon as I talk about it. So on a on a foggy summer night, 11 people, 10 very rich people and one down on his luck painter depart Martha's Vineyard on a private jet headed for New York. 16 minutes later, the plane plunges into the ocean. This, by the way, is why I didn't read it for a really long time because I was afraid to fly forever. The only survivors are the painter Scott Burroughs and a four year old little boy who's now the last remaining member of an immensely wealthy and powerful media moguls family. So you know, obviously we're asking questions like was this by chance? Was this just a problem with the plane? Was it murder, the book is definitely partly about why the crash happened and kind of what events led up to that. And that's very interesting. That's what I thought it was about. But what I didn't know before is that it's also very much about the aftermath. And what happens with the survivors, the way that the media comes in and makes assumptions and changes the narrative to fit the news cycle, not the truth. This book is much more about that than just its kind of stunning premise. And that was made it even more interesting for me. So I really, really liked this book, as I said, because it followed a book that had just been such a disappointment to me. And the second reason I loved it, it's because it was totally it was unexpected in that it had so much more meat on the bone than I thought it was going to be. I honestly thought that I was going to still be in some of that same like popcorn thriller place. This book is much meatier than that. It has a lot of that plot movement for sure. You definitely want to find out what happening. He just does a really good job of making you want to turn the pages. But it also the characters are fully drawn. You get their backstory. You understand their motivations. You don't like everybody at all, but there's an understanding there. So this book was just like the perfect antidote for me. It really was it felt like okay, yes, this is the kind of book that really, it just feels like a writer who cares a ton, which is not to say that Lucy Foley doesn't care about her writing, I'm positive that she does, I'm positive that she does. I just don't think The Guest List was the best example of that. But here, I felt like I was in the care of an author who wanted to write a book that I could, you know, speed through, but also something that was going to stay with me and had some heart. The book metaphor I have here is that I felt like The Guest List was like a one nightstand, you know, and this book was like an afternoon of tantric and I'm down for the latter and not the former. So this is Before The Fall by Noah Hawley.

**Kaytee Cobb** 31:06

Okay, I took the time to look up the Goodreads reviews for both of these while you were talking. So The Guest List has 3.87 stars on Goodreads. And Before The Fall has 3.72. So it is rated lower on Goodreads, which is part of why we don't trust Goodreads right? But also my own ratings match up more with yours, even though we disagree about before the or about The Guest List. Because Before The Fall, if you'll remember is one that I pressed, because I loved this book.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 31:35

Now that I did not remember. I didn't...Yeah, I'm glad I was... part of what I've been looking forward to talking with you about it because I knew that you'd read it but I couldn't, I didn't, I purposely didn't go and and research what you thought about it. So I wanted us to have that conversation here. But to you loved it enough to press it?

**Kaytee Cobb** 31:53

Yes, absolutely. Yes, I still think about this book. And it's been like you said since its release, which I think it was one of the first galleys I got on my on my Kindle as part of NetGalley. So probably five years ago, around the same time that you're talking about that and would have talked about it on What Should I Read Next. I just, I still think about it. And that is weird for a thriller, you know, or for I don't know, is that how we're calling this a mystery thriller?

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 32:18

or a literary thriller, I feel like you can, you can sort of use that if it has a little bit of, you know, a little bit more meat. But so yeah, part of two, I mean, this, already was going to talk about this just because it's literally was the next book that I read. But it really segues very well into our deep dive that we want to talk about today. Which is again, I did not do it all on purpose. But it does give us you know, the ability to show the difference between a book that is completely plot driven, which is *The Guest List*, right? Any of those popcorn thrillers are, are just completely plot driven. It's all about what happened. And then what and then what and then what like that, right? That's what it's really supposed to do. I mean, for all my problems with *The Guest List*, it did what it was supposed to do. Guess what? I'm sure a lot of people were saying when I was ranting about it, Meredith, you finished the book right? so didn't it do what it was supposed to do?

**Kaytee Cobb** 33:14

You didn't throw it.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 33:14

Yeah, I mean, I didn't set it down. You know. So there you go. And then a character driven book. When we think about those, we think about them as being much quieter, and all about, like, not at all about kind of what happened, but really much more about why it happened. And I realized that my sweet spot years, maybe this is a question I have, is it everybody's sweet spot? For a book to be both of those things? I actually don't know if that's a true statement or not?

**Kaytee Cobb** 33:51

I? I don't think so. I think there are people who really love that deep meditative writing, where it where we would call it quiet and character driven. And it's very internal to the story. And then there are people who really just want to turn pages and that's okay. You know, like we, And I do think that it is a spectrum, which is what you're saying that it can be a blend of both things, and that we want strong characters, and we want a strong plot. And so that means that if it's a line, we're falling somewhere in the middle, right?

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 34:26

I think the most important thing that I have realized over the course of the you know, two and a half years that we've been doing the show now is that I think you're right, it isn't everybody's sweet spot. But it for sure is my sweet spot as a reader is when I'm getting both of those things because I thought about a lot of the books that I've talked about. I will almost always bring this up when it's true about the book that it is a combination of both of those things. So for me, those are going to be my favorite books, but I

know I can think of certain readers for whom they just don't, you know, something really quiet and very, very character driven or meditative is going to be so much more what they're looking for.

**Kaytee Cobb 35:04**

Yeah, yeah, I think so too, I I in during the course of 2020. And I think you and I have talked about this a little bit, because we were all forced to kind of slow down and be quiet. Because we couldn't go anywhere and do anything and see people, I felt like I developed a stronger tolerance for a slower novel in 2020. So I was able to sit a little more and not feel like I had to be frantically turning pages in order to be interested. It could be because of my puzzling addiction, where I would, you know, set up a puzzle in our nice sunny breakfast nook area, and just be able to sit and have my body be still while I listened to a book and just have my hands moving. And that was like the perfect way for me to be able to sink into a novel that was really reflective, and not very fast, and kind of, you know, like more further on that end of the spectrum. And that makes me think of one of the books I read, like that was A Gentleman in Moscow, which we would describe as this book is about a Count, who is sentenced to house arrest, and he lives in a hotel for some 40 odd years. That's it. That's the whole thing. And you don't say and then and then and then when you're talking about it, right? It's about if you wanted me to describe more, I would talk about him, and the people he meets and the ways he grows and what he learns over that time. But I don't talk about and then and then and what, right, that's not part of it at all. So that's very much on that far, character end of the spectrum. And then the other end of the spectrum, the first book, I thought of, Meredith, was Fantasticland, because I can't even tell you most of the characters names in that book. Right? We hear from all these people, which most of them were only hearing from from one chapter. So of course, they're not really sticking with you. But you're like, but then a hurricane and amusement park and oh, my gosh, it's crazy. And your eyes are big when you talk about it, because but you don't care about who it's happening to you care about what is going on?

**Meredith Monday Schwartz 37:02**

Well and actually, I mean, I think that's a perfect example. Because yes, you're, you're so wrapped up in "And then this happened in and this happened". Not only do you not care about who are you not really necessarily thinking about who it happened to. But one big criticism of that book, and I think it's a valid criticism, although I loved that book, is that you almost get zero introspection as to why it happened. Right? It's completely left off. And I think that that's a very valid criticism of, you know, of that book. So, but yes, you're so wrapped up into end, and this happened in this happen in these, you know, really, really shocking things, that you're not getting any, any part of that.

**Kaytee Cobb 37:47**

And I think most of us, like you're saying, we fall somewhere in between A Gentleman in Moscow and Fantasticland when we're picking, you know, what do we want to read, I want not 50 page long chapters, which is more likely to happen in a character driven novel, right? That is way more likely to happen. And if it is going to be character driven, I probably want it on audio, because then my body can be moving, while my mind is quieting. And I like that being able to contrast those two things. Whereas if I'm listening to something really plot driven, sometimes I'm reading so fast that I want to flip back and see what happened, right? Like with a mystery, where you're like, "wait, did I do I remember correctly that in chapter 15, or whatever, he was wearing blue socks", I want to flip back really quick and make sure because I feel like that's a clue that that's horrible on audio, you can't do that. But if you're

frantically paging through or you're frantically listening, you can't do it anyway. So I really like I think that's what I've really leaned into as far as my own preferences. And that's what's allowed me to make space in my reading life for more character driven reading.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz 38:55**

That's a really big aha moment. For me, I had made the connection about the fact that like when I listened to The Dutch House, right very, very character driven very much not nor in my normal wheelhouse. But I listened to an audio as we all did, Tom Hanks, yada, yada, yada, it was great. And I ended up really, really liking it. So I had made the connection that character driven was better for me on audio, but I had not made the connection as to why. And I think you're absolutely right. I do most of my listening when I'm when I'm running. And so my body is otherwise occupied. And so then it's okay that my brain, you know, can do something that's a little bit quieter, a little bit deeper. So But then I also read so I mean, I absolutely think that that's true. I actually read Hannah Coulter by Wendell Berry. That's it. That's an author that a lot of people will point to, and an author that along with Amor Towles you and I had kind of rolled our eyes at forever. I ended up really liking Hannah Coulter. I mean, I think about that book all the time. I was in tears at the end of that book. In a good way, which is really rare for me, I was very, very affected by that book, I read it in print, did it slow but steady. And I think that that's the other way that I can do these kinds of books, it can't be my main, kind of sit down and read this, you know, all at once on a Saturday afternoon, I'm not going to do something character driven like that. But on audio or slow, but steady, are ways that I can do it. And the other thing is that I feel like yes, we go in these seasons, or at least I go in in seasons, I'll find myself being very plot driven for a long period of time. And then like right now, I feel myself very much in this more character driven kind of season of my reading. And my choices right now are almost surprising, my own self. And so I think I think that we have to allow ourselves to have that seasonality in our and I don't just mean obviously, like the physical seasons, but I mean, like, you could like one kind of book for a long time and then start feeling a pull to add some of the other kind in.

**Kaytee Cobb 41:03**

Yeah, yeah, you don't have to pigeonhole yourself as a reader and say, "this is the spectrum and my peg goes here", and it never shall move like we, there's, there's movement there. We're allowed to adapt and change and pick what's right for us at the moment.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz 41:18**

All right, Kaytee. So let's now press some books into readers hands. What did you choose this week?

**Kaytee Cobb 41:25**

Today, I am pressing a book that was well outside of my comfort zone when I read it. One of my very favorite character driven novels, is The Dearly Beloved by Cara Wall. This book has very little plot. It takes place over decades, right? We're following couples. The two men are Charles and James. They're co-pastoring a Presbyterian Church in New York City. Charles is very learned his family has high expectations for him. And that does not mesh with him being a pastor. James is angry and hurt and was raised by an alcoholic father and feels like God might be the only answer. Even though he wasn't raised in the church. Lily and Nan are their wives. They're so different. They're as different as two women can be. Nan is a preacher's child, she marries James and their backgrounds are

completely, completely different. He grew up away from the church, she grew up being there, every moment of every day. Lily is brilliant. In a time when women's brilliance is not celebrated. Her intellectual strengths have led her to believe that God not only doesn't exist, but he's definitely not personally invested in human beings. That's it. That's the whole setup for the book for people living their lives in New York City, during a pretty pivotal time in history. So of course, there's things that happen. But this book, I loved every word, it was like a treasure, like slowly unwrapping a present. And I went in really expecting knowing that it was character driven that I was going to hate it that I was going to be bored. And instead, like you talked about with Hannah Coulter at the at the end, I was crying, and wishing that I could be with this family for longer or these two families for longer. The jacket copy ends with "it's a poignant meditation on faith and reason, marriage and children and the ways we find meaning in our lives". And I almost fell asleep reading that jacket copy.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 43:15

Yeah, wow,

**Kaytee Cobb** 43:16

This book is so incredible. I want I want you to take a chance on it. Even if you don't think that character driven reading is your thing, because it's wonderful. It's *The Dearly Beloved* by Cara Wall.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 43:30

Now this book just in the last 10 days moved from my TBR kind of book, like cart to my up next TBR bookshelf. So it is one that I'm you know how I kind of circle around books for a long time I'm circling around this one. We've talked a little bit about the fact that I have a lot of issues with the faith that I grew up with, and kind of I struggle a ton This is a real place of struggle for me is issues around my faith. And so I kind of feel like this book would be good for me, because maybe there's some understanding there and some of the characters have had some of the same struggles. But then I'm also like, oh, is it gonna kind of put me in a difficult place. So I'm circling around this book, Kaytee, but man, I've heard really amazing things about it.

**Kaytee Cobb** 44:15

It's so good. It's so good. I'm not gonna cry talking about it, but I could if you really wanted me to.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 44:20

I don't want you to. Alright. Alright. I chose a book for my press that for me is the perfect intersection of plot driven and character driven right? My sweet spot. I am going to press *The Current* by Tim Johnston. I had to go back and double check as we often do, Kaytee that I hadn't already pressed this and I checked it like 58 different times because I was so afraid that I had because this is a favorite. Very literary mystery for me. I loved Tim Johnston. I think he is fantastic. And this is my favorite of his so the setup you guys have heard me talk about this before. Two girls are driving in winter in Minnesota, this would actually be a great book to pick up right now it's super, you know, perfect for wintertime, they get into an accident that they survive. And their car is sort of hanging right on the edge of a riverbank. But we take a big sigh of relief because they're okay. But then headlights appear behind them and like, okay, someone has come to help. But then slowly, the headlights get closer and closer. And then they start to feel their car getting closer, being pushed closer and closer to the edge. And they

go over the side into the icy river. And so the book is about, you know, why did this happen? What does this have to do with another murder that took place in the same place 10 years before? I've said this about Tim Johnston, I'm gonna say it every time I talk about him, I will go anywhere with Tim Johnston. He could write a book about precalculus in the Andes Mountains, and I would read it. I mean, he is so good. At this mix of plot driven, and character driven, not unlike Louise Penny, right? When you read a mystery by either one of those authors, you're reading, you're definitely getting the mystery elements. The what happened, you know, how did that happen? What happens next, but you're very much becoming invested in all of the characters that are involved. This is another one of those books that I would describe as having a just a ton of meat on the bone. Tim Johnston is not messing around. And I love that about him. He is like the high school professor who you know, says you know what, you can read you pay attention. You can read hard things. The book isn't hard, but it expects you to pay attention. And I love that about this book. It's my absolute favorite. So that is *The Current* by Tim Johnston.

**Kaytee Cobb** 46:55

All right. I really felt like you had pressed that before too. But I checked also, you're good.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 47:00

Thank you. I did thanks for the double check. Yeah, I really did. I checked multiple times. I know that we've talked about it in many different categories. So there, I'm sure there are gonna be some people who feel like they want to at us about, you know, why are you talking about that same book, but sometimes we have to press books that we've talked about before, so that they're on that list. Yeah. All right. That is it for this week. As a reminder, here's where you can connect with us. You can find me, I'm Meredith at @meredith.reads on Instagram.

**Kaytee Cobb** 47:26

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

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 47:30

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

**Kaytee Cobb** 47:41

I am so excited to announce that this week Megan is starting our timestamps on our show notes. So Megan, thanks for joining us on the Currently Reading team. You can contact us directly at @currentlyreadingpodcast on Instagram, or via email at [currentlyreadingpodcast@gmail.com](mailto:currentlyreadingpodcast@gmail.com) or via email at [currentlyreadingpodcast@gmail.com](mailto:currentlyreadingpodcast@gmail.com).

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 48:01

And if you really want to help us, follow us on Instagram at @currentlyreadingpodcast, which I realize now Kaytee, I did not even say in the whole run up when I was talking about that at the very beginning of the show. Head, desk moments. And then so you follow us on Instagram and then also rate and review us on Apple podcasts and become a patron. All of those things make a big difference. Shout us out on social media that also helps us to build our perfect audience.

**Kaytee Cobb** 48:31

Yes, your recommendations to your bookish friends are the best way to pass along your love with the podcast to others and help us continue to grow. Thanks for doing that.

**Meredith Monday Schwartz** 48:39

All right, until next week. Happy reading Kaytee.

**Kaytee Cobb** 48:41

Happy reading Meredith