



Season 6, Episode 20: Acts of Service + Themed Reading Months

Mon, Dec 18, 2023 • 54:56

Meredith Monday Schwartz 00:10

Hey readers. Welcome to the currently reading podcast. We are bookish best friends who spend time every week talking about the books that we've read recently. And as you know, we won't shy away from having strong opinions. So get ready.

Kaytee Cobb 00:23

We are light on the chitchat heavy on the book talk and our descriptions will always be spoiler free. Today we'll discuss our current reads up bookish deep dive and then we'll visit the fountain. I'm Meredith

Meredith Monday Schwartz 00:32

Monday, Schwartz, a mom of four and full time CEO living in Austin, Texas. And this week, I'm channeling my inner 12 year old

Kaytee Cobb 00:40

and I'm Kaytee Cobb, a homeschooling mom of four living in Arizona, and it may be 80 degrees, but I'm gonna go ahead and light the fire. This is episode number 20 of season six. And we're so glad you're here.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 00:50

Oh, Kaytee, do you know that it's it's in the high 70s today here in Austin and I totally thought, How Low Can I push my air conditioning so that it would make sense to have my fire on?

Kaytee Cobb 01:01

It's a problem. Problem. If I open all the windows at night when it gets down to you know, 40 and 50 degrees. Maybe I can make it really cold in my house by morning. Yes,

Meredith Monday Schwartz 01:11

it is a southern state problem, Kaytee. But we proceed

Kaytee Cobb 01:15

we do we make do needs must, we're going to just keep on pushing through. Because this is episode 20. And I'm driving and hypothetically I'm in control here. I'm going to let everybody know right here at

the top that our deep dive today is about monthly reading themes, especially as you're looking toward your 2024 reading year, we wanted to talk about what some of those are, and if they're actually helpful or not. And we have a quick announcement, a little mischief to manage. This Monday, if you're listening in real time, it's one week before Christmas. So we will not have an episode next week on Christmas Day, we will be back on the first of January with something special for your 2024 TBR. And then return on January 8, with our best books of 2023. Episode one of your favorites of the year. So that's kind of what's coming up in the currently reading pipeline. No surprises, it's all going to be exactly how we planned. Right

Meredith Monday Schwartz 02:03

and I am filled with existential dread about having to choose my 10 books of the year. As usual, you and I are waiting. I mean, we everyone else comes out with their best. The first week of December, I started seeing Best of 23 Best of 23 books and I'm like but there's a whole nother month. And I have read some great books in December. So you and I wait till January to even put our list together.

Kaytee Cobb 02:30

Yeah. Because otherwise, I mean, you could get cheated out of something really great. And then where does it go? You write about it and 2025 That's just lunacy.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 02:38

Right? It's lost. Its lost to the ages. So Right. That's that's why we make people wait until that second Monday of the month. But I think it's going to be worth waiting for but yeah, choosing it this year is going to be the hardest ever.

Kaytee Cobb 02:49

It's gonna be really hard. But I mean, that means we had really good reading here. So it's a good thing and a bad thing. double edged sword, right? Yeah. Let's get started though the way we always do it with our bookish moments of the week. Meredith, what have you got for us?

Meredith Monday Schwartz 03:03

All right, in true Meredith murderful style. I am doing a Christmas buddy read with two friends Kiara and Betsie. And they were already doing it. I horned in and they were gracious enough to allow me to join them. We are reading Krampus by Brom. Yes. Okay. Kaytee, refresh my memory. Have you seen the cover of this book?

Kaytee Cobb 03:25

Well, no, but I'm gonna look it up right now while you're talking about that. Look it

Meredith Monday Schwartz 03:29

up. But you know, back away from your podcast mic because you're going to scream when you see it. It is the scariest thing I've ever had my house. So Brom, you remember is the author of Slewfoot one of my best books of the entire year. One of the things that Slewfoot is so fantastic for is it's illustrations both on the cover and inside, he almost does things in like an oil painting kind of style. It's really amazing. And it definitely adds to the feeling of the the book that you're reading in slue foot of course,

we're just like folk magic and weird forest characters. In Krampus. This is like evil, Christmas demon. And the illustrations I know the look on your face is absolutely classic. And it's exact. I mean, I like gas. I've jumped scared when I saw this when it was delivered to my house. Yeah, right. So why am I bringing this up? I'm bringing this up because I was as the day came closer as we were getting ready to start our buddy read. I was saying to Johnny, like, I'm really looking forward to reading it. But the cover is really freaking me out. It's really like It's like big, it's like big, right? It's not like lit it's big face. And so he the other day. I had mentioned this a couple of times and he was busy at the dining room table. At one point I was the middle of my workday and I come out and he is putting a cover on my my Krampus book like when we were so Johnny and I are 55 and 50, right. So we're old people, when we were going to school, we had to cover our, like we were given our textbooks, and then you had to cover them. Because what they're trying to keep the textbooks nice or something that was like literally one of the things that you were tasked with doing on the first day of school was covering your textbooks. I was always really bad at it. Johnny is especially especially good at this kind of thing. And so he was over putting the most adorable cover on it. And then Betsie found a really funny, like, almost like a precious moments version of Krampus. And it's totally adorable, but it's Krampus. And so I printed that out. So he put that on the cover, and then inside there are some scary illustrations. And he made his own posted illustrations to go over on top of them so that I would be protected the whole way through this book from so I could still lift it up if I want to see it. But he anyway, it was so cute. It was so sweet. It was so Johnny and he's very artistic. And he loves me very, very well. What I said to Kiara and Betsie is he can drive me absolutely crazy. But there is nobody in the world who's ever going to love me more. And I really, really felt it when he did that. So we'll we'll put some pictures up to show you guys what that looked like.

Kaytee Cobb 06:16

Those are wonderful acts of service he

Meredith Monday Schwartz 06:19

did there. What's your bookish moment?

Kaytee Cobb 06:22

Okay, so my bookish moment is about the weather. I mean, we're back in Arizona after moving away more than 14 years ago, it's been a big adjustment, especially for our kids who are all under 14 years old, right? So they've never lived here. Even though Jason and I both grew up in the state. It's lovely. outside right now, like this is the kind of weather that people in other states are like, Oh my gosh, it's beautiful. It's spring, it's fall like it's that kind of weather outside. But it's mid December, like it's not supposed to be this kind of weather outside right now. So we're still hitting 80 degrees. That's been a big adjustment for all of us. This week, I am forced feeding us seasonal reading, we're lighting the fire it's gas so I can turn it off. If it does overheat. It's not just gonna sit there and keep pumping out more heat into our house. And we're gonna curl up together and read stories like Cozy by Jan Brett from my Christmas picture book box. And I am finally picking up per your suggestion. Meredith The Afterlife of Holly Chase by Cynthia Hand. So sometimes you let the weather dictate the feeling. And sometimes you have to force the feeling to match the mood. And that's the mode I'm in now we are making it work here. I'm making it bookish. I'm making it wintry even though it's nowhere near wintry in this house.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 07:36

I know. It's it really is when we you know in Texas, it's the same way for anything winter related or even fall related. Oftentimes, we have to just say It's mind over matter. Yes, for sure. Because but what I do know is January and February is likely to be extremely cold and potentially even snow and frost and all of that. So I'm saving a lot of my very cold weather books for that time of the season, except for one that I'm bringing today, which I cannot wait to talk about. Okay,

Kaytee Cobb 08:06

well, I'm excited to hear about it. Let's get into those current reads. Because the sooner we do this sooner we can hear about this perfectly snowy winter book.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 08:13

It is okay, that one's coming through to my lineup. So first, we're gonna talk about a couple others and I have a little bit of a theme going on. But in the recent episodes I've been I'm not trying to do it. But it seems like my mind is doing it subconsciously. Today's theme is books that maybe you thought were one thing, but you start reading it and they were another but maybe that's not always a bad thing. Sometimes it is a bad thing, but sometimes it's not. And these are examples of the latter. So the first book I want to talk about is Hotel Magnifique by Emily J Taylor. Alright, here's the setup. We've got our main characters Jani and her sister Zosa, they're having a hard time they're living a life where they're barely making ends meet and they live in a port town called Dirk but Jani fantasizes about getting out of Dirk she really just wants to go anywhere else. She ends those that get their chance when the legendary Hotel Magnifique suddenly appears in their town. The hotel is legendary, not only for its whimsical enchantments, of which there are many, but also for its ability to travel. It appears in a different destination every morning, and basically guests can buy a two week trip so they get on in their hometown. And then they don't know for those two weeks where every day where they're going to the hotel is going to land and Jani and Zoza most decidedly cannot afford that kind of two week stay as a guest, but they decide they will interview to join the staff and soon they begin the greatest adventure of their lives. And by the way, Jani's like 19 or 20 and her younger sisters like 15. So a little a little bit younger, I'd have to do a little bit of fudging to get those that in. I had this book on my middle grade shelf for a really really long time. I was holding it for a time when I was very much in need of a book that was kind of in the same realm as Nevermoor. Of course, no book is ever going to live up to that. But close, you know, that kind of magical whimsical mood, which I get into periodically. And I enjoyed this one very much. But as I mentioned, this is definitely a case of expectations, not meeting reality. But maybe it's not a bad thing, after all. So let me start out with what this book is not this book is not middle grade,

Kaytee Cobb 10:31

like on her middle grade shelf,

Meredith Monday Schwartz 10:34

oops. It is, in fact, why a fantasy now it's very clean. There's absolutely no spicy scenes. It's very tame. But our lead characters, Jani, and then some people that she meets in, in the hotel itself are young adults. And there is some romance, which I actually ended up really liking. And this book is also Yes, met my expectation in that it is full of really beautiful magic. And you know that this is something I love

in my books, the magical constructs are super important to me. And this book delivers in spades. It's got a gorgeous hotel. It's got exotic, fantastic places that the hood travel travels to magically. And it's got different magicians, each of whom have their own kind of magic. And this magic that they each have, is designed to be very beautiful, because its whole purpose is to entertain the guests of the hotel, right. So it's automatically a very beautiful magic. So all of this of the book really, really hit the mark for me. But again, this book is not middle grade. And the reality is that that was what I was in the mood for when I picked it up. But for what this book is, YA fantasy, it's a good one. And you need to know that it's darker because it is for an older audience than what I was expecting, much darker and much sadder than I thought it was going to be. And because it has depth, and well developed characters, and great storytelling, all of that, even though it wasn't what I was expecting ended up being a really, really satisfying to read what this book is, at its heart is a sister story. And I loved that. One major thing it tells us is that our siblings can be our whole families when our parents are not around or are not able to fulfill that role. And that particular message is resonant to this particular reader. So I would definitely recommend this book, I was interested the entire way through. And I wanted to see what was going to happen to these characters and to this beautiful hotel, but I would recommend that you be in the right mood for the right genre, when you pick it up. This is Hotel Magnifique by Emily J Taylor. So

Kaytee Cobb 12:45

I like the idea of this one. But I'm curious because I have a very big feeling about this. If this existed in our world, if this was not fantasy, but actually existed and there was a hotel that would just popped up and then you could kind of climb on board and took you to different locations and you didn't know what they were, would you do that?

Meredith Monday Schwartz 13:06

I would like to think that that's exactly the kind of thing that I would do. Because left to my own devices, I don't take a lot of risks. Okay, and so this would kind of be that sort of safe risk that I would just say, You know what, whatever it is I'm gonna go with the flow. And I would like to think that I would if I was going with like any of my Enneagram seven friends, I think I could be convinced, but you not for you.

Kaytee Cobb 13:29

Well, I feel like I'm too much of a control freak. Okay, which evidenced by my family's trip to Europe, when I really like to know what's on the plan for the day and what I need to wear or how I should dress day and when I should pack for that two weeks that we're going to be gone. And I think that would be really hard for me to lay down and be like, you know, whatever shows up. That sounds great. I don't think I could do it.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 13:53

Yeah, I think as I've gotten older and been in a career where I'm responsible for always knowing all those things for everybody in the places in my life where I can not have control I'm finding myself drawn to more of that. If I remember correctly in this book, that issue of packing the right thing having the right clothing available for wherever you let that was dealt with somehow in a very nice tidy way.

Kaytee Cobb 14:18

All right, that makes sense. It's given me a little bit NIGHT CIRCUS vibes like Charlie Holmberg feels like she could be friends with this with us Emily J Taylor. Yes,

Meredith Monday Schwartz 14:27

I think those are very, very good comps, what is not a good comp? Nevermoor. So, I gave myself the wrong comp, but hopefully giving you guys the right one.

Kaytee Cobb 14:38

Okay, excellent. Okay, my first one is also a fantasy, but it's neither white nor middle grade. It's Tress of the Emerald Sea by Brandon Sanderson. Oh, yeah. So this is my very first Brandon Sanderson book, but not for lack of trying by our bookish friends, which is why Meredith just said, oh, yeah, there are quite a few big fans in there, including Andrea. Andrea, this is a shout out for you and Are you going to be so glad that I'm finally bringing a Sanderson book to the show? The reason I finally picked this one up though is because I got a direct recommendation not only from my Heather one of my reading friends but from her kids. And for some reason that really like that really will get me. I don't know why. Oh, so

Meredith Monday Schwartz 15:18

that's what we need. There's an oh, I need to have Jackson called you and asked aunt Kaytee to read Fourth Wing?

Kaytee Cobb 15:25

There's there's a key here. Yeah. And it's, it's magical because I was like, Listen, I'm not interested in a Brandon Sanderson wreck and she was like, okay, but Alison and Bryson wanted me to tell you about it. I'm okay, fine. I'm listening. What what are you going to tell me? So, we all Alison Bryson, Heather, her husband, we traveled together last December to see Carrie Ellis do a live group watch of the Princess Bride. So her kids and I really bonded over our love that movie. And that's how they were able to convince me to pick this up. Tress of the Emerald Sea is about of course, a woman named Tress, it's loosely related to The Princess Bride. She lives on a desolate island near the emerald sea, but in a world totally different from our own. Here, there are 12 seas and they are made of spores instead of water. In fact, this world is so dangerous that if water touches the sea, the spores sprout and become deadly. Tress has fallen for the Duke's son on this tiny island. His name is Charlie. But soon after our story begins he shipped off to find a bride per the orders of his father right before he leaves they declare their love for each other. So he's determined to bore any potential brides to death with his heavy on the chit chat talking style. Opposite currently reading of course. When the Duke returns home with a prince that is not Charlie, Tress finds out that he has been captured by the sorceress who lives across the world, she must cross all of these 12 Deadly seas, terminating in the Crimson Sea and the midnight sea to rescue him and bring him home. And so begins her adventure. There are pirates, there's potions, there's talking rats, there are souvenir cups and finding out that you're braver than you think. And women kicking serious booty. And I loved it. I loved it so much. This was probably aided by the fact that I had also recently tried another book that was hypothetically Princess Bride adjacent, or a retelling, but was actually just fully stupid and made me want to commit bodily harm as I read it. It was great practice for my DNF skills, but not great for my reading life. That means I was especially delighted

by this much looser tribute to one of my very favorite stories of all time, written with wit and excellent characters. The setting came to life, this planet that's covered in these like lunar seas that are all different colors with these beautiful spores that all act in different ways. So cool. The adventures were fantastic. And I especially loved the surprise of big feminist energy here. Brandon Sanderson wrote this book for his wife during lockdown, and then put it on a Kickstarter campaign to see if it had legs. And the four book project was funded at nearly \$42 million. So the answer was, yes, it did have legs. What I know. It's astonishing. So it's like one of the most successful Kickstarter campaigns of all time.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 18:14

Did you say \$42 million dollars,

Kaytee Cobb 18:17

then the four book set? Yes. That he is

Meredith Monday Schwartz 18:20

being paid by random fans. I mean, I'm sure he'll probably do something with that money. Well, they get copies

Kaytee Cobb 18:27

of these four books. Yeah,

Meredith Monday Schwartz 18:28

yeah. But wow, okay. Yeah.

Kaytee Cobb 18:32

This is big. It's a real big, okay. When the book came to the market, which was in January of this year, it was first published by his publishing company, which is called Dragon Steel. And then it was picked up by Tor in April. And we love that, of course, the hardcover is really beautiful. I just got the regular Tor hardcover, not the special Kickstarter funded edition. And it's beautifully made. It has these gorgeous end papers, it's worth owning, as I directly insisted that both of my older children pick it up as soon as possible. So again, this is not my a, this is not middle grade. It does have some language in it. But Levi has already finished it. He loved it. And he is my 10 year old and it was like, it's an adult book. But the proximity to Princess Bride, the adventures they go on, it was a perfect fit for him. So that's two of the five of us so far. The five readers in my family Jason reads, but only occasionally that have already loved it. I love a standalone fantasy novel. So while this is the first in the Cosmere series, which is the set of four that he funded through Kickstarter, it stands alone perfectly well. It wraps up tidally at the end, it is excellent. It's Tress of the Emerald Sea by Brandon Sanderson.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 19:40

Oh, man, that's one that I have. And several people have said, I think you'd really really liked that one. So good. Yeah, I'm so glad you liked it.

Kaytee Cobb 19:48

Okay, what's your next one?

Meredith Monday Schwartz 19:49

All right. My next one is this is an example of a book where I had higher expectations and it didn't meet those so not a crash and burn but not fantastic. So this is *Last Rituals* by Yrsa Sigurdardottir. Here's the setup. At a university in Reykjavik, the body of a young German student is discovered and his eyes are cut out and strange symbols are carved into his chest. Police waste no time in making an arrest but the victim's family. The victim's family is not sure that the person that they have in custody is the right person. The family hires Thora Gudmundsdóttir, who is an attorney and a single mom of two to investigate what really happened and it isn't long before thorough and her associate Matthew uncover the murdered students obsession with Iceland's grisly history of torture, execution and witch hunts. But of course, there are contemporary horrors that are hidden and long, cold shadows of dark traditions. And suddenly, our two investigators may be in more trouble than they ever thought they would be in. Alright, so Yrsa Sigurdardottir has been an author that we've been talking about, Elizabeth initially brought the fantastic five star read, *I Remember You* to the indie press list in January, one of my favorite books, absolutely love it. It's ghostly. It's creepy. It's fantastic. She also writes this series of books, of which I have read the sixth one, I picked it up accidentally and read it. And then I wanted to go back and read the I want to read it in order because not an animal. But although so many people told me that this first so many people, they really did told me that this first book in the series is not her strongest, the completest rule follower in me had to do this. So this book has some significant problems. But I am glad that I went back and started here. And that's the thing I kept thinking, as I prepared to talk about this book, I enjoyed the experience of listening to it, which is how I took it in quite a bit. Even if all the way through, I was talking to my car stereo or my air pods, telling them the problems that I had with the book. So let's start with what I liked. I liked the Thor Gudmundsdóttir, character quite a bit. I like the fact that she's not a policeman. She is an attorney. But these books are largely following the format of a police procedural, I like that she's a mom, and we get peeks into her home life, while we also follow the crime that she's investigating. Those things are very much for me, and they had a part in the sixth book, which is called *the silence of the sea*, which I've already brought to the show. That's that book where this yacht bangs into the pier and people are waiting for it to come back into port but there's nobody on it. That's that but also, you all know that I love a premise that involves a ritual killing, who among us doesn't, gouge somebody's eyes out and I am pressing play. So the strange factor related to the one murder that we're investigating was enough to draw me in. And the audio narration kept me reading. This is Icelandic with a lot of German names too, because that's kind of where our plotline is going. So the audio was really, really good. But the significant flaws in the book are there. First of all, in this first book, *The Thora Gudmundsdóttir*, is kind of adult, she's not very decisive. And her lawyerly abilities don't really come to the forefront, she largely ends up following around this big handsome German guy who works for the family who hired her and she's not super impressive. This is what I'm trying to say. I didn't love that energy. And as to that large German guy who works for the family who hired her, the romance that comes into play between thorough and this guy, his name is Matthew is silly, irrelevant, and entirely unbelievable. It just didn't need to be there. Finally, you cannot overlook the fact that this book had some serious structural issues. It's way too long by at least a third. And part of the reason that it's too long is because there are way too many irrelevant details that she tags on almost parenthetically, I don't need to know exactly what she eats for breakfast. I don't need to know exactly the sound her computer makes when it's logging in. So it's like a very backless like I can't remember what it is, but it's an old, it's an older book, these kinds of things irritated

me and they took me out of the story. I just ended up rolling my eyes over and over again. So this book will end up getting only three stars from me, but I will continue to read in the series because I love the Icelandic setting. I love everything about the culture and I firmly believe that the character arc and editing is going to get better as the series goes on. This is Last Rituals by Yrsa Sigurdardottir.

Kaytee Cobb 24:39

Okay, my second one also did not meet expectations. It's Let Us Descend BY Jesmyn Ward. Oh, this is the newest release from the two time National Book Award winner, as well as a lot of other prestigious awards. She pretty regularly writes with a touch of magical realism and her novel and this one is no exception. However, it did not land for me. And it doesn't seem to be landing for a lot of other readers either who expect to really love it, even ones who are really looking forward to it. So here's the setup. Annis is our main character. And she starts the novel with the first weapon I ever held was my mother's hand. And that is a fantastic first line. Yeah, she's quite young at the start of this novel, learning at her mother's knee, everything from how to manage the slaveholders home where they live to how to forage for food in the woods and find the good stuff to eat and the stuff that will cause certain deaths in the person who consumes it and how to carry a spear and use it to disarm or kill a man and his nose. She is the illegitimate daughter of the man who owns her and her mother. But when she as a teenager refuses his advances and again, this is her father. He sells her mother away from her as soon as possible splits them after another difficult loss. He sells her friend as well. The one who had come to comfort her and her grief, the two of them are forced on a march hundreds of miles long from the Carolinas to the swamps of Florida. And it's turns inward, constantly thinking of the tutor who was teaching the legitimate children of the owner. He was quoting to them from Dante's Inferno right before she was sold. Let us descend, the poet now began and enter this blind world. That phrase comes up over and over again. And obviously it is the title phrase for this book. Throughout the harrowing journey, Anis is repeatedly visited by spirits of the women who came before her, including her African warrior grandmother, the one who taught her mother how to use a spear to disarm or kill a man, these spirits guide and protect her but may require more than she is able to pay in return for their services. This book was literary, but also easy to read. It was magical realism, but felt approachable, like it feels like you know, if I was going through something really hard, I would want my grandmother to visit me and encourage me and her like finish goodness, right. It was difficult historical fiction and includes many triggers, but also felt powerful and exciting. Despite all that it didn't work for me. It felt like she was forcing herself to try for another award. Like the words weren't flowing onto the page, but being extracted involuntarily from her pen, or from her fingers. I don't know how she writes. There were beautiful sentences and powerful characters as we've come to expect from words writing, but it continued to fall flat for me, despite how much I really wanted to love it. As is pretty common in literary fiction. There are no happy endings here. No tidy bows, no sweet reunions, but that didn't keep me from devouring this book, whole cloth in just two days over the Thanksgiving holiday. It was broody and dark and difficult. But then it felt like nothing. By the end like I felt kind of numbed at the end. So I only ended up giving it three and a half stars, which was very disappointing, especially because it's so pretty is like I wanted it to be one that I had to display outward on my bookshelf because I loved it so much. It did not. It was sad. The book is Let Us Descend BY Jesmyn Ward.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 28:05

And oh, I'm so sad that that one didn't work for you. And like you, Kaytee, I have heard almost to a person. People just not loving it. And I know there were really high expectations. I hate that. Yeah,

Kaytee Cobb 28:19

I hope your third one is excellent. So I'm excited.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 28:22

I'm so excited to talk about this one. Kaytee. This is *Cold People* by Tom Rob Smith. This one, I just this is why I don't do my best to top my top 10 of the year until the end of the year because I just read this a couple of days ago. Here's the setup. And actually, I have to say, and I always tell you guys when I do this, this is directly from the marketing copy. But this book is set up perfectly in the marketing copy in to my mind, here's what it says the world has fallen without warning. A mysterious and omnipotent force has claimed the planet for their own. There are no negotiations, no demands, no reasons given for their actions. All they have is a message. Humanity has 30 days to reach the one place on earth where they will be allowed to exist. Antarctica. That's the entire setup. And it's absolutely perfect because that's all you need to know to get into this. Okay. Cool. People gave me chills in the very best way possible. I was blown away by this book. I heard about it on *From the Front Porch*, the from the front porch podcast and it was such a sleeper. I had never heard of it before. I mentioned it to several people and they had never heard about it before. And this book needs a broader base. It's very, very good. The biggest thing I realized is that the premise which as I've told you is very simple and yet extremely hooking makes a person think this book is a book about aliens. Even the cover, which you have to take a look Get the cover. Even that leads you to believe it is a book about aliens. And while aliens certainly figure in the plot, they are maybe 5% of what truly makes this book a page turning read. And I think knowing that is key because this isn't an alien invasion story. It's a very, very human story. Maybe the most human story I've ever read. It's truly a book about what it means to be human, which I know saying that on a podcast is incredibly soft before it like yawn, right? Have to book about being human. Okay, it's about what makes humans wonderful, even in all their awfulness. It's about human survival. So if you love a survival story, you will love this one. It's so good. I didn't realize how fascinated I am by Antarctica. But it's become my new obsession. This book is about the fact that humans are so awesome. And that can be easy to forget, at least it has been for me. But humans will survive and even thrive through horrifying circumstances, they will bring sport and art and fun and culture, wherever they are. Just give them enough time. This book shows us this. Also, this book has lots of details about what might happen in a massive human Exodus like what are the logistics? Who gets chosen to be transported? What are the conditions like this book has some really breathtaking and absolutely terrifying alien tech, it has the whole entire scoop on what life on Antarctica looks like. And if we could survive there, this piece was fascinating. It has details on what a utopia might look like and asks the question Can at last, and it has humans created through genetic mutations? What might happen? Spoiler alert, more good things than you realize. Further spoiler alert, more bad things, too. I looked at reviews and complaints about this book, if there were any, it only has a 3.5 rating on Goodreads, which is way too low for how good it is. But basically, there were two complaints, both of which I think are stupid. Here we go. The first one wrong, and they're wrong. The first one is that I know a lot of people complained that there was too much exposition in the text. Yes, there's a lot of exposition, but I found it to be fascinating. It never dragged for me. The chapters are short. And the multiple characters that

were following are so well drawn that I cared deeply what was going to happen to them. Also, I think it has some lower views because people picked it up thinking it's an alien book. And it's not and that's fair. But what it is, though, is so very good. This book is perfect for you if you liked Station 11. But you thought I wish it was so much more sci fi. It's perfect for you if you love stories, where you learn a lot about things you didn't know before. And if you love to see the resiliency of the human spirit in action, and also it's heart pounding, and scary, and just crazy good. Y'all the cold people are worth the price of admission. And they are not the aliens. And it is fascinating. This is Cold People by Tom Rob Smith. And it is in my top 10 of the year. Yeah, it really like flipping through story graph reviews. Also 3.5 stars over there. And it's like all over the place. Lots of people give it five stars, though. Oh, so good. It's so good if you like covers creepy literary murder fall, but also make it survival in sci fi. This will be in and very cold. This will be in your top 10 of the year. It's so good. Okay,

Kaytee Cobb 33:56

I'm excited about that. For one I have to mentally force myself to feel colder than I actually am. Which is a lot right now. Yeah, I can I have to look for that one. Okay, my third one this week is nonfiction. But hilarious. It's Fuzz: When Nature Breaks the Law by Mary Roach. This book is just like Let Us Descend, obviously, because it has a bright yellow cover. But that's where there's similarities. And Mary Roach is well known at this point for her irreverent narrative nonfiction. She's willing to try things and ask questions that most of us would consider either yucky or uncouth doesn't bother her, and we all benefit for it. And fuzz she examines the way that nature and humans interact, because we've moved into a world and pushed into the untamed wilderness in order to tame it. But that means we're pushing animals and birds and insects and everything else out of the places that they've been living for millennia. So now we have situations like those in Aspen, Colorado, where bears raid the garbage cans of local businesses after closing time, or the difficulties that the Vatican faces On Easter Sunday when birds ruin all the chairs with their defecation that were sent out the night before in order to wrangle the large crowds for the Sunday service. She visits wildlife rescue centers, wildlife management offices, and farmers who are dealing with rodents and birds who eat their crops. The subtitle makes it seem like this is a book about monkeys who break into stores and steal bananas because it's when nature breaks the law. And that can be true as well. There is a whole chapter about monkeys, but it's really about that permeable membrane between our human civilized society and the natural world that we are pushing out into. The blurb includes this fantastic sentence and I couldn't skip it. Combining little known forensic science and conservation genetics with a motley cast of laser scarecrows, Langer impersonators and trespassing squirrels, roach reveals as much about humanity as about nature's law breakers. When it comes to problem wildlife she finds humans are more often the problem and the solution. I read this one along with my Katie. And we laughed just as often at the footnotes as we did at the text itself. I didn't listen to part of it on audio as well as a tandem read, since it's read by the author and Mary Roach has a great lilt to her narration. And because she talks these people in person, she'll put in her pseudo accents for each of them, which is hysterically funny, but she skips the footnotes in the narrated version. And of course, you don't get the excellent pictures at the beginning of each chapter. So if you can only choose one paper is the way to go here. I also heartily recommend this one for the hard to shop for outdoorsy person on your list. I'm considering a copy for my dad this year for Christmas. And as a Mary Roach fan, I'm sure he's going to love it. I laughed until I cried about stuff as silly as albatrosses and mice and everything in between. This was Fuzz: When Nature Breaks the Law by Mary Roach. I have meant to read a book by Mary Roach forever, because I just think I would probably love

the way that she writes. I think you would too but you know which one you're going to read. We're going to read it together. Actually. Meredith, I'm telling you right now, we're gonna read Bonk, which is about the science of sex by Mary Roach. Oh, yeah. And Katie already read it. So I don't have a buddy reader for it. And she is so funny. She's so funny. So we're gonna read that together. I love it. That's bonkers. Yeah, I read Stiff by her, which is about cadavers.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 37:23

Oh, well, that sounds good. Fine.

Kaytee Cobb 37:24

Yeah, I know. No, it was amazing. And it's all like they talk about forensic applications and Body Snatchers. And people who are cannibals that eat human bodies. Like she goes, she goes the whole way across. I broke our poor friend Joy when we read it together. So it's like, I'm never going to be the same, Kaytee.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 37:44

I love it.

Kaytee Cobb 37:45

I love it. All right, those were our six current reads. Which means now it's time for a deep dive where we're going to talk about themed reading months, and I was trying to remember way back we got this question probably years ago, at this point from our bookish friend, Aubrey Cheadle, who is still a fervent, bookish friend, great supporter, so fun to talk to. But she asked years ago, what are the themed reading months? And Are they helpful or useful in any ways? So to start this one out, I wanted to do kind of a short rundown of what comes up first, when you think of a themed reading month are things that we hear about in pop culture, the 2024 reading Tracker will track all of these for you, and many more on a separate sheet. But we've got stuff like February is Black History Month, we have middle grade March, which is one we love here at currently reading pride month in June, nonfiction, November, right? These are things you hear about, you'll see bookstores kind of curating their displays in order to capitalize on those themes for the month. Meredith, do you like a themed reading month?

Meredith Monday Schwartz 38:47

I mean, I think you can probably guess the answer to this, Kaytee, I don't do well with reading challenges. And I don't do well with themed reading months, because I don't, as soon as you tell me, like May is Asian Pacific American History Month. And so we're gonna, which is and I don't mean to say that in a way that sounds like I don't love that. Because I do. It's just like, I might gravitate toward books, and I do buy Asian Pacific authors. But then as soon as you tell me, okay, now read them in May, or, you know, like what you do in February, where you read all Black authors in February, I could never do that having to do I couldn't read all of any one thing for a month is what I'm saying. And so, so no, this is not something that's a part of I've tried to do it. I've tried to do kind of tangents or related reading challenges where it's like, okay, well, you don't have to just like pick something from this bingo card, right? It's just not the way I planned my reading. But what about for you? I feel like this is something that does matter in your reading. So

Kaytee Cobb 39:49

I've kind of evolved on this through the years as a reader, and which, which may be why I didn't want to answer it years ago when Aubrey first brought it up, and now I feel different about it. But now my answer is more like yours. So, in the spreadsheet, there are 19 different themes in the tracker that you can click and say, Yes, I do want to track this theme, everything from like Poetry Month and April to Latinos Heritage Month, Jewish Heritage Month, Middle Eastern Heritage Month, like there's so many of them. And I don't track any of them anymore. I just leave them all unchecked, because I don't even want to see it. Because, because it does feel like kind of being forced into a box. And part of the reason that Aubrey and I had talked about this a long time ago, was the idea of saying, Okay, well, I'm going to read only black authors in February, which I still do pretty regularly. It's been a few years now, where every February, I've read all Black authors. And the question is, does that mean for the rest of the year, I'm reading hardly any Black authors, because I like shot my load, right? I used it all up in February. And now there's nothing left. And are those authors then suffering later on in the year because people who would be buying their books already did that, like, now we're over you? Right, which we see a lot we see it with. It's called Rainbow washing in June, when there are big corporations. And they're like, Guess what, this month, we love rainbows. Right? Everything is Rainbow flavored, and rainbow color and rainbow, blah, blah, blah. And then July 1 comes around, and they're like, We don't like rainbows anymore. Now we like red, white, and Americans, America. Yeah, exactly. So it is a thing where there's a big focus on something for a month, and then that gives you not gives you but gives the person kind of license to say for the rest of the year. Well, now, I don't care about that anymore. It doesn't matter to me. And I think that's kind of how my reading has gone over the past few years where I've said, I don't want to say, only in May, I will be reading all Asian Pacific Islander literature and then not read it at all for the entire rest of the year. However, I do think if you are a reader who wants to try and add diversity of any kind to your reading life, and it could be reading middle grade, when you thought you were only an adult reader, and it could be trying poetry for the first time as an adult reader, yeah, then it can be a way to guide yourself towards something that will push you out of your comfort zone a little bit. And the same with a reading challenge, right? Like, you could say, I'm not a reading challenge person, I just want to read what I read, I just want to like what I like, but I'm interested in making my wheelhouse a little bigger, and trying out some things that maybe I wouldn't in another circumstance. And so maybe that's the reason that you pick up either a reading challenge or a themed reading month, is to try and broaden that wheelhouse.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 42:42

Right. The other thing that I think is useful about it, as you said at the start is that while we might not need to put all of our reading of those kinds of books in that particular month, it is really helpful that there is the focus on the part of libraries and bookstores and different kinds of social media to shine the light on those and then we can read them throughout the year. So that's more how I how I use it. And I think that that's really important. I think that you know, also again, if you're the kind of reader who likes that kind of structure, then it can be an excellent way to organize your reading calendar. So lean into that if you're a planned reader, who loves a themed month. I lately have been getting a little bit more into the different kinds of bookish holidays, in that it's like just a day. So the in What month is it that has in April 12 is dropped everything and read day. It's Beverly Cleary his birthday. Yeah. And so drop everything read obviously, it's dear. And so we've been for example, trying to plan our reading, retreat around, drop everything and read day because it's a great way to say you know what, one time of year,

we're going to put a few days together, we're just going to do that. So I kind of like the idea or there's a one of these is library month, What month is it? That's national? February. Okay, right. So like February National Library lovers month. So what a great, you know, it would be very easy to say, You know what, for the month of February, I'm only going to get library books. I'm not going to buy anything, I'm just going to get library books or I'm going to go to the library every weekend and use Booker serendipity to choose my books for that month. So those kinds of things are a little bit easier for me because then I have a lot of play as to what I'm reading, but I can also feel like I'm celebrating something bookish and I do think that we need more bookish holidays like everyone caught lemming like Icelandic what is it called the books led yoga Volca flag right like let's everybody calls in and we're all staying home and we're all reading and that's like all of our dream, right? But we can celebrate it personally. In August. That's romance Awareness month so I have no I have no problem saying I'm gonna front load some romance written by all kinds of writers. You In the month of August, so all of these things just give us the ability. I like talking about it right now, as you said, kaytee, this was your very smart idea to talk about in this episode. As we're thinking about the reading year, that's past, what do we want more of? And then also, as we look to the reading year in the future, do we want to put a few things on our calendar, where we say, You know what, I'm going to read more LGBTQ books in Pride Month, because that's important to me, or I'm going to at least make sure that that month where they're getting a lot of focus, I'm going to grab some of those and get them into my rotation. I'm going to buy more, I'm going to get them on social media, I'm going to give them some more focus. So that's, that's the way that I think this kind of calendaring is useful.

Kaytee Cobb 45:47

Definitely. Well, and because people like to hear a little bit about the behind the scenes of podcasting part of it. I'll also add that you and I have this extra challenge with months like this, right? Because every year, at least one of us will bring it's March, I wanted to bring this middle grade book. But that usually means we had to read it in February. So we're not playing by the quote unquote, rules of the themed reading month, even though we're giving you options for things that you could read during that month if you were a themed reader, and it happens with Halloween and spooky season. And it happens with holiday books when we're like, listen, I read this last year, but I couldn't tell you about until now, because it was already like the holidays were over. Right? So when you're trying to read on a theme, and your recording 10 days before your podcast episode drops, and that month might be over by then it can be hard to kind of figure out how to make that work anyway, which I, which is I think why it has fallen off the radar for me for the past few years is because it was too hard for me to be like I'm reading all Black authors in February. Well, what does that mean? In March, all I'm doing is talking about Black authors and people are like, Hello, we're moved on to middle grade now. Yeah. Okay. Well, this is what I read in February. Right. So it has that kind of cyclical messiness to my reading that made it less satisfying, right,

Meredith Monday Schwartz 47:06

and you're slowly turning into a mood reader.

Kaytee Cobb 47:08

I know. It's so annoying, because I have that planned reader mug. I love that mug. But we also have a mood reader version of that. Yeah, I know what that means. I need another mug.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 47:17

I know. I know we are we are a little mug rich. What I do think so I pulled up this book right list of book holidays, which we can share in the show notes here. But it has a lot of really interesting ones almost for each month. And it occurred to me, for example, the last Friday of October is National Frankenstein day. I said it right that time. And so that would be a perfect time to read *Our Hideous Progeny*. Right? So it occurred to me that if I was someone who could spend time on social media, I am not I don't I just don't have a lot of bandwidth. But if I had more, I would love to go through this calendar. And on these days, say like, Hey, it's national ballpoint pen day. That's a real thing on June 10. And I happen to know that there's a book which is not coming to me right now. But I guarantee you I can find it that centers. It's a middle grade book about a kid who's selling Frindle. Thank you, Kaytee and I together could very easily play this game rule the world. And we didn't I just think that would be a fun thing to do on social media. Like how do you recommend a book for national ballpoint pen day? Well, I'll bet you we could do it. Well,

Kaytee Cobb 48:24

I got the perfect one for national cheese day whenever that is because that *Princess and the Grilled Cheese Sandwich* book now. Right.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 48:31

So anyway, that's real rabbit hole. But I do think there's a place for themed months, but each reader needs to decide what to take from that and what to leave aside from that. And it all comes back to read or Know thyself.

Kaytee Cobb 48:44

We need a mug that says that

Meredith Monday Schwartz 48:47

point we need another mug a lot of new mugs. Well, you came up. I was gonna say you have you just made our new mug in the currently reading style that says *May your coffee be hot and your book be unputdownable*, which a lot of you might not know is what we say at the end of every show. Because maybe you don't listen all the way through which I would do if you've heard it a million times. But that's what we say at the end of every show.

Kaytee Cobb 49:11

Right? And it was specially requested at the fountain and a Wish granted by our bookish friends. That's what happens. Wishes get granted sometimes. Yes.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 49:20

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Kaytee Cobb 49:24

my boredom on a Thursday morning. From there. Let's go to the fountain. Let's make some wishes. See what we can get granted. What's your wish this week? All

Meredith Monday Schwartz 49:34

right. Well, obviously we are in the mood to think about the year in review. We are as we said, we're getting ready to Aaron episode of our 2019 Best of books. We're thinking about that. We're going to be ready to record some commentary about that for that episode. And then also we're getting ready for our big What did we love most in 2023? And it occurs to me that I just wish that everybody would would make that list for themselves. Right? If you can, if you've been tracking your books in any way, shape or form, whether it's a list on your phone or a notebook or something, or you use the currently reading reading tracker, which gives you the ability to sort easily by five stars, and then choose your favorite of those five star reads. That's how I'm going to choose mine, it's very useful to do again, it helps you to know what really worked for you in this past year. And also, there are several different ways that you could do it, you can keep it very simple. Again, a note on your notes app on your phone, use a really pretty notebook and just jot down your favorite 10 of the year. So you can look back to that, I use an Etsy store where I just give the Etsy store owner my 10 books of the year, and she makes a really cute, like art print that she sends to me. And then I put him in matching frames, and I put them in my library. And I can't tell you how many people end up looking at those. And we end up having lots of bookish conversation around just looking at my 10 favorite books of any given year. So I want everyone to consider maybe using social media on your own Instagram to make your list or make your graphic in whatever way you want to do that you can use Canva you can use just the text portion of it doesn't need to be highly designed, give it its own hashtag, you'll always be able to find it like Meredith Schwartz's top 10 books, and then every year I give it that I will always be able to find it for my own self. So I just want everyone to take a moment, make your list as you get to the end of the year, and then figure out some sort of way to memorialize it so that you and maybe others if you want to, can benefit from seeing that. And it's

Kaytee Cobb 51:32

so fun. Like you said, we're just about to revisit some from five years ago. It's so fun to look at what has stood the test of time, what remains a favorite for you what you maybe feel a little differently about So having something graphic and visual that you can refer back to in some way whether it's further back on your feet or up on your library wall. Both great options means that you can see how you have changed as a reader, which is the coolest thing. I love that. It

Meredith Monday Schwartz 52:00

really it really is it really helps you to know yourself and to see that change over time. Definitely.

Kaytee Cobb 52:07

Okay, my fountain wish this week is a Christmas book. I'm going to press Marley by John Clinch, okay, into your hands. So it's the Monday before Christmas, Meredith gave us a fantastic Christmas read last week for her fountain wish so I'll add mine to the stack Marley by John Clinch is not a retelling of A Christmas Carol by Charles Dickens. But it does draw on the characters of the original story to give us a prequel of sorts. While the original novella starts with Marley was dead to begin with. Marley is very much alive in this novel, where we get to know him as a young boy. See how he grows into the man that he becomes. And then he turns into a greedy miser whose afterlife is so bad that he needs to haunt Ebenezer Scrooge, the two of them meet as children and their friendship develops over decades,

for me added so much to the original story, even though it's not part of the canon. It's not part of what Dickens wrote about this character. It made me think of why I enjoy fanfiction the way that I do. And it's because other authors are free to play with the characters and story in a new way that the original author didn't expect or intend. I loved it. I think it's a fantastic holiday read, and I hope you pick it up for this final week of the holiday season. It's Marley by John Clinch. Ping, splash,

Meredith Monday Schwartz 53:24

excellent, that is a great one for you to press into people's hands. And that's one that I very much hope to read in the next couple of weeks, but then you won't hear about it from me until next year, by which time you will have forgotten about it anyway, and so it's perfect. Excellent. 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 @MeredithMondaySchwartz on Instagram.

Kaytee Cobb 53:46

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

Meredith Monday Schwartz 53:50

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

Kaytee Cobb 54:00

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

Meredith Monday Schwartz 54:06

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Kaytee Cobb 54:32

bookish friends are the best friends. Thank you all for helping us grow and get closer to our goals and make up new mug ideas

Meredith Monday Schwartz 54:39

are speaking of until next week, may your coffee be hot

Kaytee Cobb 54:43

and your book be unputdownable.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 54:45

Happy reading Kaytee.

Kaytee Cobb 54:46
Happy reading Meredith