



Minisode: Our Show Regulars' Top 10 of 2023

Fri, Jan 19, 2024 • 59:52

Mary Heim 00:10

Welcome to a Currently Reading bonus episode. We have got a treat for you today listeners, so get ready. I am Mary Heim therapist and mom of one living in snowy Wisconsin, and my top 10 for 2023 totally surprised me.

Roxanna Kassam Kara 00:26

Hi, Mary. I'm Roxanna Kassam Kara, a marketer and mood reader and a mom living in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. And I've had more five star books this year than ever before.

Mary Heim 00:39

Roxanna, I am so excited to talk to you about our lists today. And to get to do this together, we were just saying it's rare that you'll find just the two of us on mic. So I'm very excited to talk books about you today. You always sell me on so many good ones. Oh, yeah, I

Roxanna Kassam Kara 00:55

have my notepad and paper ready. I know, I'm gonna get a lot of great recommendations from this list. So it's for all currently meeting listeners. But it's also just for us to catch up and find out what our best books are so excited to dive in. Totally

Mary Heim 01:09

awesome. Okay. Well, Roxanna, I'm curious, before we get to our lists, what felt significant to you about your reading this year? Or as you were pulling this list together? What were you noticing? Did you track your stats

Roxanna Kassam Kara 01:23

I did. Kaytee got me on that currently reading tracker, I didn't do it in 2022, and then got FOMO and did it at the end of the year, and learn so much. And I remember that last episode of 2022 being like crap, these guys have, like amazing insight into their reading. And so I did it for all of 2023. My method is I quickly added in Goodreads, and then I go every four or five books, and then add the stats on just the columns. that mattered to me in the reading tracker. So I was able to track that. And I'm glad I did. Because I had a very singular year this year. It was an interesting year, I went on a bit of a kind of midlife journey in terms of just kind of re looking at a lot of my life, like my professional life and my identity as a in my career and also in home life. And we bought a new house and change jobs and did a lot of stuff that required a lot of soul searching, which was really, really great and really needed. But it really did have an impact on my reading. So when I looked at my stats back from last year, I'll keep it really kind of short and high level. But I read 83 books last year, which is more than usual, just reflecting

kind of what I was going through in life. I had 20 5 star books, which honestly like this is why the tracker is good, because I was like, Yeah, I had a mare reading your I'm sure it was fine. And then I looked back and I was like No 20 5 Star books, another 19 were between 4.25 and 4.5. And another 12 or four star. So it was like the best year that I've had. And so that helped me appreciate that. Yeah, I read a lot of damn good books this year and made this list really hard to choose from. So I thought that was really fun.

Mary Heim 02:59

I love that. You know, I think that I think Kaytee and Meredith talked a little bit about this in their episode. But it really goes to show that I think you did an excellent job of reading what you needed this year. Right or reading what was working for you to have that many five star books. That's that just goes to show you are trending in the right direction with your picker.

Roxanna Kassam Kara 03:20

I love that. Yeah. And I think part of that was using the reading tracker. So in 2022, I noticed I mean, I had a hard year 2022 I was reading a lot for comfort. And I read a lot of romance. I read 30% romance. And I didn't hit for me like I love romance. But I think I read too much, because it was easy to get into. And then the payoff wasn't there. So that was one of my you know, out of that data. I was like, Okay, I'm gonna read less romance in 2023. And I did you know, I read about a third of general fiction, which is the same I read 20% mystery, which was the same, but I read half of the romance I did last year. And that was great, because then I read more memoir, which I love. And I also read a whole host of new genres like sci fi, speculative fiction, fantasy, self help. There's a lot of kind of learning this year business books, and that made my reading life really varied, I think and that really helped me have a lot of five star books, I realized I like change and I like contrasts. So if I'm reading the same or something, I need to switch it up. And that's where those five star books come in. So yeah, that was my reading life. I read 24% POC authors, I'd like to get even higher this year. But overall, I was really, really happy with how my reading you're meant this year. What about you, Mary, how was your year?

Mary Heim 04:31

I love that. Well, I mean, it comes to no surprise me, you know, to anybody who's listened to any episode with me since March that my reading year was really impacted by the loss of my dad. So I will say I started off strong with my reading tracker and then after March it just kind of that was one of the first things that you know, the non essential things have to go but I am reinvigorated and excited to get back to tracking again this year. And I will say this Roxanna, That's something that was really fun for me in 2023 is we started doing chapter book read alouds with my daughter, and I don't track those on my goodreads, maybe I was thinking now that we're reading more and more of them, I was like, well, I should, I don't know. But where I was tracking them was in my, you know, the reading tracker, which friends by the way, I'm realizing as we're talking about this, if you're not familiar with the reading tracker, this is a bonus for our patrons comes out in January. So that is this magnificent tracker that we're talking about. And I put all of those books that I read with my daughter, those chapter books in the reading tracker. And that was really fun to to start to see the way that my reading life has expanded in that way this year. So even though the details on that kind of fell off for me after March, it was even just those first three months of the year gave me some really good and interesting insight. And you know, my total this year has was 79 books, which I think is pretty, pretty good for hard year is a little bit lower

for me than normal, definitely lower than my highest a couple of years ago, really before kids, right. But all in all, I too felt like you said Roxanna is that I think I had a really good reading year my reading really met me where I was this year. And it was really very, you know, I said on my bite sized intro that my top 10 List surprised me. And there's more nonfiction on this list than I think there ever has been. Since I've been tracking. My reading really was very this year. You know, I our listeners will hear this in just a moment. But I read a lot of books with grief themes. But also, that's really what I needed. I did have you know, plenty of escape when I needed it within my fiction. But I also did lean into some harder, darker, sadder heavier books than I have since the pandemic right in 2020. I think I just read straight fluff all year long. And this year, I was really needing to see my experience, and my emotions mirrored right in front of me and my books, I needed them to be a mirror that way. And as a result of pursuing that I feel like my my reading year really served me it met me exactly where I needed to be. And I feel really satisfied with this list. I feel like my reading really gave me what I needed it to this year. So I'm really excited to hear what came up for you. And I'm excited to share these.

Roxanna Kassam Kara 07:22

And I will say I think that's that's the point of every you know, that should be the goal of everybody's have your reading. I love what you said there, Mary, I think it's important, like my reading rarely met me where I was. And I think you know, I say that all the time, like your reading is there to support you, you're not there to support your reading. And so whether you track or not, if the your reading is meeting you where you are, and it's it's supporting you, then you know what you're reading has done its job. That's really, really neat. And I say that to like if I read my number, it can go anywhere at this is was the highest if it goes down as low as 12. I'm okay, a book a month, I'm honestly I don't care. I just means that I'm reading books that I'm enjoying and that are supporting me. That's great. Absolutely,

Mary Heim 08:03

yeah. Amen to that. I feel like it is a quality over quantity thing for sure. And they think that I know I can get this way get stuck in the quantity piece. But if my reading is quantity over quality, I am not enjoying it. If it's quality over quantity, like you said, even if it's I read 10 books, and every single one was a hit. Great. That's that's a good year for me. So with that said, I would love to hear Roxanna, we're gonna ping pong back and forth and kind of run on down our list this year. So I would love to hear what starts for you what starts your list off at number 10.

Roxanna Kassam Kara 08:40

Okay, so number 10, for me, is *The Uncommon Reader* by Alan Bennett. So this is a backlist gem. You know, it's a book about the queen who discovers a bookmobile at Buckingham Palace, which starts her journey as a reader. And you know, I really loved this book. I didn't pick it up, it came out in 2007. And I didn't pick it up because I figured it was a second sort of curmudgeon story. But that's not what this is. This is the story of how a non reader becomes a reader, and how that challenges their thinking and makes her question her traditions and how she relates to people, and how it changes her view of her role and her view of the world. So it was really beautiful. And obviously the fact that's the queen is just the icing on the cake. Right? It is really beautifully written. It's really relatable for anybody who, you know, has a reading challenge them. I think it's also light and short and subversive and funny and smart. And the ending is completely ludicrous. And it was just such a fun, offbeat book that I read on my

commute to work and I enjoyed it so much more than I thought I would so that's the uncommon reader by Alan Bennett.

Mary Heim 09:47

I love that book. Roxanna, you're reminding me I've got it tucked away on my shelves and I feel like I should give that a reread. It's a nice, you could read it in a day or two. I love it already. Already. You are encouraging me I'm on my TBR All right, well, my number 10 My first one on this list is, It's Easier Than You Think: the Buddhist way to happiness by Sylvia Borstein. I don't know who I am starting off with a nonfiction book Roxanna. Like I said, you know, that was something that really surprised me this year. And here we are. This one was definitely a surprise for me. It was recommended to me by a colleague, and she very explicitly told me that I had to listen to it on audio. This is a short little book on the Buddhist philosophy of suffering and happiness. Narrated by the author, renowned Buddhist teachers. Sylvia Boorstein, one of my mentors, getting a little therapist here for a second likes to say that if you're suffering is at a 10, and your resistance to the suffering is also at a 10. Suddenly, you're dealing with 100, as opposed to right, just the 10 of the suffering. And that doing Yeah, that little concept is basically the foundation on which this book is written is how much are you resisting what's coming up for you? It is at the core of a lot of the work I do right as a professional but also it's something that I need to constantly be reminding myself as a human being as well as am I just letting myself be in my experience right now? Am I resisting that which is hard? Or am I just kind of letting myself flow with it? I absolutely loved listening to Sylvia Boorstein with her congenial and wise way about her her adorable accent. Just, you know, just take me to church on anxiety and suffering and the ways in which we make this world so much harder on ourselves and we need to I loved it. I'm probably going to listen to this book on a yearly basis. It has just found such a place in my heart. You do not have to be I'm not Buddhist, I just found it very enlightening and interesting and lovely. And it was just such a warm and wise sharing of knowledge. It's pretty backlist. I think it was written in the 90s Maybe, but absolutely still feels relevant and current for this day and age that we're living in this very anxious place. That is It's Easier Than You Think by Sylvia Boorstein. Okay,

Roxanna Kassam Kara 12:11

I've not heard of that one. So thank you for so much for sharing that. That seems like it's it would be really, really relevant. And I agree. I think I spent a lot of time in resistance without even realizing it. So that's a great one. I think that's the first one I'm adding to my list Mary. Next. Love it. Okay, well, my number nine funnily enough ties in a little bit to that. And it's not what you would expect it's A Court of Silver Flames by Sarah J. Maas, which I really loved. You know, this was the fifth in the Court of Thorns and Roses series. And it was a book focus on a character I didn't think I really liked. It was the fifth book in the series, so I didn't really expect to like it. But I've been really warming up to series the last couple of years. So I thought I would give it a try. And I just loved it. It was one of the most immersive books I've read all year. And I love a good book about a woman going through a journey. Amen. You know, hell yeah, that's what this book was, it was really about one woman's journey, recovering from trauma and recovering from some stuff about not feeling good enough. And she used a lot of physical training and exercise and kind of getting better kind of knowing her body more to get there. So that I found really interesting usually fantasy books, you know, they do it in a more of a wasn't like, I wouldn't call it like a rocky sequence. But it was kind of like that, like training and kind of being more in touch with her body and all processing the feelings that came up from that, which I thought was really, really

interesting. It's also a lot about female friendship, and it's about supporting yourself when you need it. You know, she had at one point in a house that delivered her anything she needed, including a constant supply of romance novels, and it just seemed so perfect. The arc of the story was really great and it will be one of my favorites in this series for sure. So that's A Court of Silver Flames by Sarah J Maas. I

Mary Heim 13:57

had to get me one of those houses That's right.

Roxanna Kassam Kara 14:01

If I could choose a house to live in it would be that one like imagine a house just that knows your every need and just would put a have a hot bath drawn for her and like her perfect snack ready. I

Roxanna Kassam Kara 14:12

was like, Oh God, this sounds perfect.

Mary Heim 14:15

I love that I funnily enough read many novels with sentient houses this year. I don't know if that was just right happenstance or if we're moving in that direction with fiction but I'm here for it more of it. I love that but I especially love the sounds like when that really right maybe a book you didn't expect to meet you right where you are this year Roxanna, but that it met you right where you are. And I love that so much for you.

Roxanna Kassam Kara 14:41

Thank you. And what's your number nine.

Mary Heim 14:44

My number nine is Happy Place by Emily Henry. Now this one, of course is on many lists. This needs no introduction. And I will say this. I loved hearing Meredith and Kaytee talk about it on their top 10 conversation because I think Have, they both perfectly captured the essence of who this book is for and who it isn't for, right? I know Meredith and I diverge on our tastes and romance. I love a bantery millennial book. And I'm never going to tell Meredith. I understand that about our tastes. I really just like saw and heard my friends in those pages. Emily Henry just does not disappoint for me with how she writes her characters. The reasons that this one worked so well for me also have so much overlap with the reasons why it worked so well for Kaytee, the themes of choosing a different path of making a choice for your well being and just kind of letting go of the expectations of others. And also just letting yourself kind of like leap and the net will appear a little bit right. It also really resonated for me in regards to friendships persisting over so many years of becoming different people alongside the ones who love you most and are willing and able to grow with you. I actually ordered a copy for my college roommate who is not traditionally a reader, right? She and I don't talk about books at all. We live in different states and I just sent it to her with a note that was like I don't I just need you to read this book. I just needed to send this to you. I have so many friendships so many wonderful people who have grown alongside me and stayed with me in my life and this year in particular feel so incredibly thankful for those relationships that seeing those friendships reflected in this book just felt like such a hug. It felt it

was really lovely. This book rose to the top of my list of Emily Henry novels and totally earned its spot and my top 10 this year. That is Happy Place by Emily Henry.

Roxanna Kassam Kara 16:41

I love that that was my favorite Emily Henry too,

Mary Heim 16:44

huh? Yeah, that's a good one. And she's I feel like kind of a you love it or you hate it, but you're probably gonna fly through it pretty quickly, regardless. Yeah, love it. What's up next for you, Roxanna?

Roxanna Kassam Kara 16:55

So next for me, number eight is Sisters of the Vast Black by Lina Rather. So this is one I talked about on our CO video, actually. And it's the book about nuns in space that live in a giant slug for a ship. So before everybody fast forwards for this one, let me just tell you what I loved about it. So, you know, I said this year, my year was very varied in terms of the kinds of things I read. And every now and again, I really do like to blast my palate with something totally different. You know, it helps me wake up from reading the same book over and over. And so sci fi novellas are like that chili pepper blast that I need in between more of the general fiction. So this book, as I said, it's about nuns in space, they live in this giant slug, it sounds really campy, but it's not, it's actually a lot more than that the book opens on an order of nuns that live on the edges of the galaxy. And they're really out there ministering to the different planets where all these different populations live, and just sort of helping them get through their days. And then they get a call from the Roman Catholic Church, which still exists on earth, saying, listen, we're tightening up our processes, we want you to be not processes, but like we're tightening up and making sure we are monitoring all the different ships out there doing our work. And we want to make sure that you're converting people and doing the good work of the Roman Catholic Church. And these nuns are not having it. You know, they've been out there for a long time, they've got their, their ship, I think it's called Our Lady of Impossible Constellations, it's got an amazing name. And they just tried to evade this young priests that's coming to kind of get them in order, because, you know, they recognize that what they need to be doing out there on these planets is really helping these populations. So you're kind of feeling the dread from this priest coming in what's going to happen there. And then, while that's happening, they get a distress call from a nearby planet, and find that it's been overtaken with a sickness that turns people into zombies. So all these kinds of plotlines come together. And what they discover is that there's a huge conspiracy involving the whole space system in the government. And it's really, you know, can this small order of unimportant nuns change the course of the galaxy? That's what this book is about. This was the most surprising book I read this year. It was 176 pages long. And it was a character study, a romance, a sci fi, and a horror book like the last third had me so freaked out, I said on our video, I was looking up on the subway to make sure I was still planning to meet other people, zombies murder zombies running after because I was so scared. It was so shocking to me how this book could take me through so many emotions. And it ended with Mary, you talked about a book where there were two pages that really kind of resonated with you. The last two pages of this book, The ending is so resonant and it filled me with such hope. And it's about how a small group of people or how one person can make a difference against the tide of injustice and evil in the world. It was just incredible. If you need something different to blast you out of reading. Try Sisters of the Vast Black by Lina Rather

Mary Heim 18:37

Roxanna, when you talked about this on the CO video. I was like, Oh yeah, put that on my TBR immediately, but I feel like hearing you describe it again. Now, I was like, I need to download this to my Kindle today. Like, I need to read this book. Right now it just sounds perfect. I love everything that you're saying. It's like one of my favorite makeup genres right as books that make me feel things about being a human. And I feel like this one might click into that category at least a little bit. Also with this like fantastical nuns on a slug, right? It just sounds like a fantastic reading experience. I cannot wait to pick this one up.

Roxanna Kassam Kara 20:35

It is really great. And I'm so glad to hear you say that. And I will say for you, Mary and other readers, sci fi novellas. As I said, it's kind of like building the plane while you're flying it. So the world building is happening while the action is happening. So in the beginning, it's a little bit like Murderbot, like you're like what is happening, I'm not sure I get everything. Don't worry, just go with it. You don't have to get every single plot detail just kind of flow along except don't resist about 20% in it'll come together and you'll follow the main plot. So that's just my advice for that one. That's

Mary Heim 21:05

good to know. I think I enjoy that a little bit more than spending 40% of the book on world building. So that's great. Well, my next book is also kind of a slim novel little surprise that I was not expecting to end up on my list this year. And it is The Saturday Night Ghost Club by Craig Davidson. This was one of the wildcard picks from my October autumn spooky reading guide if you are a friend of mine on Instagram, and while I haven't brought it to the big show yet I know that I want to eventually because this book was an absolute sleeper hit Saturday Night Ghosts Club read to me like if Claire Keegan wrote Stranger Things to be a literary fiction novella. I swear this is the weirdest comp that I could ever give. But it is the most accurate description I could possibly think of. This is a coming of age novel that follows a group of misfit kids who spend their summer break investigating local ghost stories and urban legends. With uncle Calvin, he's uncle to one of the kids in the group, what starts off as kind of a fun and lighthearted project to wait to spend their summer turns into this spectacularly beautiful reflection on the losses that we carry the love we have for those who matter most and the ghosts we leave behind. I want so many people to read this book when I shared my reading guide in October those fall, kind of spooky reads I said if you are not someone who's going to pick up the latest witchy romance or if you are seeing all these kind of popcorn thrillers coming out in the fall, and you're wanting something more literary, you're wanting something that's really going to sink its teeth into you. This is that book. It is not very long. It's really pretty quick. You could read it in a day or two. But the way that Craig Davidson packs such a story into this really short amount of pages is spectacularly beautiful. That has stayed with me and will continue to stick with me. That is The Saturday Night Ghost Club by Craig Davidson.

Mary Heim 22:02

Okay, you've sold me on that. I think Claire Keegan writing Stranger Things. I was like, what?

Mary Heim 23:17

I need to read that that sounds amazing. I cannot wait to hear I'll read Sisters of the Vast Black and message you Roxanna and then please read Saturday Night Ghost Club and message me I would love to hear what you think of this one. Okay,

Roxanna Kassam Kara 23:30

it's on my list. Okay, number seven, for me is Small Change by Roan Parrish. I'm not going to go too much into this one, because I just talked about it with Kaytee on the last episode. But I really love this one. So Mary, you know, you talked on our CO video about books that really hit you in the feels. And you talked about romance that you loved. And you said the romance part was okay, but the grief part really hit you. And then Kaytee said that about Happy Place. And you just said that. That's what Small Change was for me. So this book is about an over ambitious tattoo artist who owns her own shop in Philadelphia. And she's tough and she's independent. And she's trying to juggle being the boss having this LGBTQ tattoo shop, but also having this career as an artist, and a guy comes into our life. He's a sandwich shop owner, he wants to take care of her he wants to support her. And she's not sure she has time for him amongst all her busy goals. And that really starts her down a path of questioning, like, why does she have these goals? And what are her values? And are the values that she set for herself? Or are the values that other people set for her? And what does she want her life to look like? And that's exactly where I was this year. And so that book really did hit me right where I felt it so it was just, I'm finding that romance books are now almost my new self help books. I don't want to read a self help book, but seeing a character struggles through the same issues I'm struggling through in a messy way. Really, it's like walking the same path with your best friend except you're right in their brain. So it really helped me kind have uncovered some truths about myself and really get to what mattered to me. And it was just a really great book. It also taught me about the tattoo industry and, you know, misogyny in the tattoo industry and all these things I would not know if I hadn't read it. So that's Small Change by Roan Parrish.

Mary Heim 25:16

I love a good romance plus, right like, it's almost to the point now where it maybe I'm a little bit more rom complex. But if I don't have that additional element within my romance or rom com novels, I'm like, I'm not interested. I'm wanting to make me feel some things I want to like, walk that path along with those characters. That's a perfect descriptor. Yeah, I loved it. Well, Roxanna, my number seven is another one that I have not yet brought to the big show, but do think that I may give it the full treatment. Eventually it is Dancing at the Pity Party, a dead mom graphic memoir by Tyler Feder. Now, you may be familiar with this author from some of her other books, including one of our favorite picture books in this house, which is Bodies are Cool. We love that book, Feder, here in this adult graphic memoir tells the story of the loss of her mom to cancer in her early adulthood, the author's early adulthood, and how she has lived and grown without her. I'd seen this book floating around well, before my dad passed Well, before I read it for a variety of reasons, I avoided it right? This doesn't necessarily sound like a super cheerful book to pick up and read. But whether you have your own grief to contend with, or you just want to love and understand the grief of somebody you care about, or maybe like me really love books that make you feel things about being human, pick this one up, I feel like it perfectly represented the way not only that parent loss can feel so unmooring, but also just really put into words, I found myself wanting to just like snap pictures of every page and send them to my friends who are asking me, How

can I support you? What's going on for you? Right, she really really did a great job of explaining and showing like, this is what it looks like. This is how it feels to kind of live without a parent to contend with that loss. And I think that this could be a great read for anybody whether that's a personal experience for you or not, again, like a previous book that I brought to the big show to discuss with Kaytee in Malagash, this one will keep you in your feels for just long enough to really feel something and then pull you out before it starts to feel too overwhelming. Right? There's levity and joy and hope still amongst the grief and the sadness. And that I think makes it and not easy read, but maybe easier to contend with than you would anticipate for this topic that is Dancing at the Pity Party by Tyler Feder.

Roxanna Kassam Kara 27:44

I love this list, Mary because it's giving me a lot of books that I'm going to put on for when I need them. You know, like I'm you know, we're all gonna go through these life events. And when you're in the middle of them, and you're unmoored, you don't have the time to start looking for the things you need. And you've done some of that work for us. So this one, I'm already adding it to my list. And I love that what you said about it being great to hand out to people who are looking at how to support you, right, I might just read it for that reason. It's so so good to have that. So you're not always putting the onus on the person who's going through the grief to talk about how they support them. So that sounds like a great book. I love that it's

Mary Heim 28:19

a graphic novel. Yeah, yeah, I think the format really helps it along to, while Roxanna, what's up next.

Roxanna Kassam Kara 28:25

So number six, for me is The Covenant of Water by Abraham Verghese. So this was a buddy read with Meredith. And I'm so glad I did it this way, because I'm not sure I would have gotten through it as fast as I did. Without Meredith not to say this was an incredible book, but it is a slow but steady. And sometimes it's nice to have a partner right to help you kind of gain that momentum all the way through. So I won't talk too much about this one. Everyone knows what a Covenant of Water is about. It's a sweeping epic about love, faith and medicine, spanning 1900 to 1977 in Kerala, on South, India's Malabar coast. What I really loved about it is that the book had the rhythm of waves. To me, it follows three generations of a family that suffered this peculiar affliction. And that kind of is a thread through the whole book, and you are kind of leaning in, and then it's pulling you out, and then you're driving you back to shore. And it just kind of load you like that too. I loved that rhythm. It's beautiful, lyrical writing, but that's still accessible. But then it's kind of inter exposed with kind of graphic scenes, whether they're medical and surgery scenes or highly cinematic scenes that have you on the edge of your seat. It was just such a unique reading experience. You know, this is one I don't think anybody who gets through will regret reading this book. It's just such a such a singular experience. It's really is kind of an epic, modern classic and that's The Covenant of Water by Abraham Verghese.

Mary Heim 28:59

I love hearing the books that you know that you and Meredith share that you buddy read together. Because I feel like what you two are doing with this obviously I know this is not the purpose of your buddy reads, but you have really curated this beautiful list of books to process with with a friend with someone who really knows you and understands you and also loves to read right, can have these really

great conversations about the experience that these books take you on I like to make note of my sister is my primary buddy reader though I also I buddy read a lot with her bookish friend Betsie and a few other friends and I love to kind of file these away like oh, okay, that sounds like a good one to read with Shannon. That sounds like a good one to read with Betsie I knew to do an excellent job of pulling those buddy read books together. Well, thank

Roxanna Kassam Kara 30:38

you. Okay, what's your next one?

Mary Heim 30:40

My number six book is Starling House by Alix E Harrow. Of course, Starling House is another one that needs no introduction. If you were in a bookstore in a library on Bookstagram this year, you have seen this book all around. I have enjoyed Alix Harrow in the past but I am not an Alix Harrow evangelist like so many others are so I had tempered expectations going into this book but I loved this one. I read it in the fall shortly after it released and I just found it to be Pitch Perfect in its creepy fantastical other worldly adventure. Alix Harrow is an absolute magician with her words. And I cannot get over even months later how much I adored the sentient house in this story as we were talking about earlier, Roxana, there was romance. There was mystery. There was fantasy rooted in history in our world, but definitely not our world. It was so weird and wonderful and totally captured me her writing is just spectacularly engrossing. And it was so much fun. That was of course Starling House by Alix E Harrow.

Roxanna Kassam Kara 31:50

You know, I'm reading The 10,000 Doors of January right now. It's my first Alix Harrow. And I'm loving it. And I'm putting it on my list because so many people were talking about how amazing Starling houses. So I can't wait to get to that one down the road as well. You know, I

Mary Heim 32:04

didn't read 10,000 Doors of January until 2023. So she was fair. I had read some of her previous books, her previous works in shorter novels. But yes, this was an Alix Harrow year for me and I thoroughly enjoyed it. I think Starling House is definitely a different novel than 10,000 Doors of January, but there's a lot to love. And you'll find a lot of similarities in the way that she just captures you so well with her writing in between the two. Okay.

Roxanna Kassam Kara 32:32

Okay, so my number five is The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo by Taylor Jenkins Reid. So this isn't a surprise for anyone. It's an amazing book. And I'm not going to belabor it because everybody knows that except me, really. But what this taught me about my reading is I think I tend not to pick up books, I think that are like the big bestsellers, the fluffy brain candy, because I think ultimately they'll be unsatisfying, and it doesn't matter to me. Like the the experience of reading with other people doesn't matter to me. It's more how how satisfying a book is. So when I see a book that's everywhere in Bookstagram, I tend not to pick it up. And this book taught me Hey, like take a chance if there's a book that continues to be one that people are always talking about. If it's on a lot of Best of lists, chances are I would like it to and I really did. It had such depth while being so compulsively readable. I really was immersed in Evelyn's world of old Hollywood. I was struggling with her. She made these choices in a

world driven by misogyny and men. I just loved every twist and turn of this story. And one of the goals I made for 2024 is to read some more of those big blockbusters when they really have staying power because I think there'll be real winners. For me. That's

Mary Heim 33:45

such a fun goal. And I love Evelyn Hugo. I think that's Taylor Jenkins Reid at some of her best. Yeah, so I'm so glad it worked for you.

Roxanna Kassam Kara 33:54

It was so great.

Mary Heim 33:55

Well Roxanna, my number five is *The Shadow Cabinet* by Juno Dawson. This is the second in a series. This is the second book to *Her Majesty's Royal Coven*, which if you'll remember I had a very tumultuous relationship with I spoke about this on the podcast. The surprising twist at the end of book one made me want to chuck it across the room and I was almost positive that I was not going to continue on in this series. But I waited a good long year to pick up book two I let that story simmer. And I am so glad that I did. It gave me enough time to cool down my spicy feelings to step back into this world and just be willing to see where the author wants to take us with this story. This is both an action packed feminist which book and also a seriously well written social commentary from a ridiculously talented author who has true lived experience in so much of what she's writing about. I am here to tell you that I haven't been this excited about a series in a very very long time, I put this book down and just catapulted into a book hangover, the likes of which I have not seen in ages. Absolutely. This book earned its spot in my top books of 2024. And I am chomping at the bit for Book Three, and actually very excited. There is a prequel novel that's coming out in July I think novella about Anne Boleyn. So I'm just like, give me everything in this series. I cannot wait to see what this author does with it. That is *The Shadow Cabinet* by Juno Dawson.

Roxanna Kassam Kara 35:33

This is another one. I didn't pick this up. But now you have put this on my list because, yes, I remember your spicy opinions of *Her Majesty's Royal Coven*. But hearing that you love this one so much I might dip into the series.

Mary Heim 35:45

She is masterful in how she writes. And I spoke about this with Kaytee, in our most recent episode that we were we talked about endings. And I think that something that's really great about this one is yes, I felt very strongly about the ending of book one, when it comes to a series, right? I'm willing to look at the arc of the series as opposed to just the arc of the book, right. And what she appears to be doing with the ARC of this series is absolutely genius. She is such a talent. And I I truly cannot wait to hear where this one goes to see what's to come and will be so curious to hear what you think if you pick it up. Nice.

Roxanna Kassam Kara 36:25

Okay, yeah, on my list, honestly, I'm gonna, I'm gonna be picking up all of Megan's notes after this one and making sure I have all of these in my to be read list. Love it. So my next one is kind of a hard left turn. It's a nonfiction self help book, it's Essentialism, the disciplined pursuit of less by Greg McKeown. So I first read this book in 2020, when there was a lot of buzz around it, I think it's 2019 2020. But he was talking about this book. And I think I just read it because I felt like I had to read it and kind of wanted to download it into my head. And it didn't stick with me at all. I didn't like it at all, I thought it was pretty common sense and just raced through it. But then Kaytee brought it up in one episode, you know, as one of her favorite books. And that really convinced me to give it a try. And it just reminded me again, the books meet you where you are, you know, in 2020, the last thing I needed to hear was how to choose between the endless possibilities that lay before me, that was not my experience. And I had to add stress, to me reading a self help book, like it just didn't work. But this year, I was kind of looking at a lot of different paths I could take. And so this book really resonated with me, it just gave me a great structure, on how to think through choices. It gave me permission to say no to things. I love lots of everything I always have, I love lots of opportunity. I love lots of projects, I get distracted by lots of things. And this book is the perfect antidote to that and a guy to live by, it doesn't tell you to do less. It just helps you focus on what's most important to you. Sometimes I'll admit, it can be cheesy and jargony. It is a business book, after all, but the principles are solid. And my favorite line from the book is do not underestimate the unimportance of almost everything. And often when I'm scrolling through Instagram or looking thinking about well, do I need to get the newest Dyson air wrap? Or do I need to take on this new board position? Or should I sign my kid up for this program that everybody else is doing? Like all the choices, I realized like this shouldn't even be in my choice set. It's not even something that should come up with me. I do not underestimate the importance and importance of almost everything. So it's a great one for me. And I would recommend for those of you even if you're not a big self help or business book reader, this is a great one to pick up especially at the beginning of year, that's Essentialism by Greg McKeown.

Mary Heim 38:41

This one's been flooding on my radar for a while since it was buzzy, but I haven't gotten to it yet. Roxanna, you might have just bumped it up near the top. This sounds like it might be a good time for me to dig in. Yeah,

Roxanna Kassam Kara 38:52

I think it's really it's all about living to your values. So that one really resonated with me. Well,

Mary Heim 38:57

Roxanna talked about hard left, I'm going to turn us yet again. My next book is Dead Elenven by Jimmy Juliano. I am so excited that this one ended up on my top 10 books of the year because it is horror. And I am not a horror reader or not. Traditionally, I'll dabble here and there, but this one totally earned its space. It is campy, kind of scary, wild and just ridiculous horror that has just so not been my jam in the past, but it was really really fun to have a book so outside my wheelhouse be such a big hit for me this year. I shared this book on an earlier episode, I've shouted it from the rooftops on my Instagram. But essentially, as a reminder, this is a mysterious island just off of Door County in Wisconsin, where everyone appears to be stuck in 1994. And they are very cagey about the reasons why but it's clear

that something sinister is going on here. I gobbled this book up and enjoyed every second. This was also the books this year that helped me parse some things out about my tolerance for scary books. I think if the threats are too real, we've talked about this before, that I kind of when it comes, I don't read like serial killer fiction, right? Or that kind of horror, if it's something that somebody could potentially bring to a therapy session with me, right? If it's something that could happen in real life, I am not interested in it. I hear too many horrible, traumatic real life stories every day, that I have no capacity for that in what is supposed to be my escape, right, but gives me something so wildly unbelievable, and in no way possible for it to really happen in real life. But it's scary and fun to read, that does not bother me. And that is actually the kind of quote unquote scary fiction that I enjoy. I will say, this one is creepy. And it is a bit scary. But I actually thought that Night Gardner by Jonathan Auxier, the middle grade book, I found that book was scarier than this one. So if you're a little bit of a wimp, like I can be as well, I know that you can probably handle this one. But it was just so much fun. For me, it is a Midwestern author as well, which I love. It is, you know, in the area, where I live and vacation and all those things, I will for sure be keeping an eye on this author to see what he cooks up next. This is Dead Eleven by Jimmy Juliano.

Roxanna Kassam Kara 41:19

So this is one I likely will not be picking up, Meredith, I'm not a horror person. But I love to hear about it. And I love that it's, I totally hear you. You know, I work for a not for profit, I used to work with families with sick children. So if it was anything kind of traumatic there, I wasn't going to go there. You know, but I hear you. If it's kind of outside of your normal every day, then it can be really really actually an amazing escape, which is sometimes what you're looking for.

Mary Heim 41:45

Yes, totally. Am I going to be a dyed in the wool horror author horror reader now? Absolutely not. But occasionally when I feel like being a little spooked, this is a fun one to fall into that category for sure. What's up next for you? Roxanna?

Roxanna Kassam Kara 41:59

Well, speaking of things that you know, sometimes you want to sample, we're getting to the top three. And my number three is high fantasy. It's the Daevabad trilogy by S.A. Chakraborty. So that's the City of Brass, Kingdom of Copper Empire of Gold trilogy. This is my first kind of I had read A Court of Thorns and Roses, but this was my first full length trilogy series of a fantasy like this. I'm not into this all you know, a ton of world building in those kinds of fantasy books. But as I said, this year, I wanted to try new things. And wow, did I really fall down the rabbit hole with this book? These books take place in a fantastical 18th century Cairo and follow Nahri who is a con woman, Dara who is a darkly mysterious Djinn warrior and Ali who is a conflicted Prince whose family rules the kingdom. I think this alternate Cairo like very exotic location really, really appealed to me. And these books just took me on such a journey. For weeks I was wrapped up in this world, it was exactly the escape I needed, and realized nothing else really wraps me up and immerses me like fantasy does. I was with these characters as they traverse seas as they navigated political intrigue, as they figured out their feelings for each other as they tried to save their kingdom. You know, it really saved me towards the end of a dreary winter, and provided that escape that I really needed when I was trying to work through so much on my plate. So that's the Daevabad trilogy starting with the City of Brass by sa Chakraborty.

Mary Heim 43:32

I love that I feel like no one who has been paying any attention to your reading this year surprised that this one ended on your top 10 list, but I also you know, I feel like hearing you talk about this series over the year Roxanna has really been a good reminder for me of like pick up books outside your wheelhouse or pick up books that you normally wouldn't necessarily highly prioritize it is a good reminder that we as readers are always growing and it's fun to be surprised and and pushed outside of your wheelhouse. I love that

Roxanna Kassam Kara 44:02

and this one was one another one I buddy read with Meredith exactly for that reason, because I think we both knew was outside of our wheelhouse. And so we wanted to try it together and I really loved it and moved on to books two and three. And she liked it a lot and decided Book One was enough and that can you know both paths are totally valid, but it's good to sort of read together and give it a try. I

Mary Heim 44:21

love that. All right, well, Roxana book three for me as you have kind of referenced a couple times over the course of this episode is Seven Year Slip by Ashley Poston. so if you have heard me on the podcast this year at all, you have likely now heard me expound on my love for this book multiple times, including in our most recent co video together with all four of us Seven Year Slip is the story of Clementine and the accidentally occasionally magical apartment that she inherits from her aunt after her unexpected passing clementines apartment right occasionally slips backward or forwards in time, seven years and one day she opens the door to find a man thing there who of course, you know, she falls in love with write. I've said this before, I'll say it again, I think if you read this as a rom com alone, it's good and enjoyable end of sentence. But if you read it with personal experience with grief and loss, this is likely going to be a knockout for you like it was for me. There are a few pages near the end, as you referenced before Roxanna that just made me weep for the beautiful, perfect radiantly heartbreaking way that she describes and understands the grief and the love we carry for our past loved ones. So Well, I still will go back and read those pages on occasion when I just need to feel something. This is absolutely the book that made Ashley Poston an auto buy author for me. And like you said, this was one that yes, it's a rom com, right. But I feel like I was really living alongside this character processing, like how do you just exist in the world, right? There's people all over everywhere, everybody is living with hard things in one way or another, whether it's grief or otherwise, and just kind of carrying on with their lives. It really helped me. This was kind of in the summer, it had been, you know, maybe three or four months since my dad had passed. And I was starting to feel that, okay, I need to be living and grieving now. And this gave me kind of a beautiful template. As I was shifting into that phase for myself. If you pick this book up, definitely go read the author's note, I thought it was really fascinating. She notes how she started this book. But with these topics not being so concrete for her and then about near the end of her writing, I think she mentioned she lost her grandfather in a dissimilar way to my own loss, but still losing an important person in her life, and went back and just rewrote the whole novel, right really infused her own grief into it. And I think it shows that is Seven Year Slip by Ashley Poston. You've

Roxanna Kassam Kara 46:54

put that on my list for exactly that reason. I think romances are really good at helping you process things and meet you where you are. And now I want to read this one for that reason.

Mary Heim 47:03

I cannot wait to hear what you think Roxanna. Okay,

Roxanna Kassam Kara 47:07

now we're getting near the top here, Mary. So my number two will be a surprise to no one who's been listening to currently reading it's Tom Lake by Ann Patchett. I'm sure this is true for many people. This one for me, I think was as much about reading experience like Kaytee and Meredith talked about as it was about the actual book. I read this in the last days of summer, which is when it was released. And this book it's a lot like shadowing the wind only in how atmospheric it is. I found this book just had that exact sort of blast if summer sepia tone about it. It's a story about a woman in midlife who is going through ups and downs, but ultimately accepts them in his content with her choices. And you know that living through your values and being content with the choices you make, as I said was a big theme for me this year. So it really hit me in all the fields as well. Ann Patchett's writing. Like I was stopping. I was listening to some audio because Meryl Streep which I adored. And I would stop every few sentences and send a voice message to Meredith because the writing was so beautiful. So for those of you who think it might be a fit, I did talk on an episode about how it might not be a fit for people. But if you think it might be a fit and you haven't picked it up yet, this is a great one for when you need like a break glass in case of emergency excellent book. This will be Tom Lake by Ann Patchett.

Mary Heim 48:28

We all need those sometimes. Yeah, I love it. Exactly. Well, Roxanna, my number two book this year has gotten a lot of chatter in the last few episodes. It is Divine Rivals by Rebecca Ross. Divine Rivals is another one that needs no introduction, especially if you caught Kaytee's excellent setup just a few weeks ago, I will admit this book sat on my TBR for far too long because while I am always down for a You've Got Mail retelling, I also kind of thought God's historical Ishwar time fiction, how on earth is this book going to work? But Roxanna, it was so good. These characters are so well drawn. This world is so excessively fascinating. I really and truly love fantasy where the magic happens in our world and Ross paints such a beautifully vivid picture with her story like this is good writing. It's not just like, oh, this was a fun romp. It is an excellently told story. I've recently brought the second book in the series to the big show. And I mentioned to Kaytee that I was almost annoyed with how well Rebecca Ross told this story in just two books, right? Sometimes a series goes on and on forever, and you're like, come on there. We could have edited this down, right? This didn't need to be 12 books, maybe it could have just been four. But I felt the opposite here of like, how is this only two books I want to live in this world for longer. I want to live with these characters for longer, but she really did a spectacular job of telling exactly the story that she wanted to tell within just two bucks and they were such A great ride such a fun ride and this one rocketed me out of a book slump was so much fun I have booked to ready for you as soon as you finish because there is quite a cliffhanger that we end upon but if you were skeptical like me and you've got any interest whatsoever in fantasy historical fiction are a great enemies to lovers and fairly close door romance pick this one up that is Divine Rivals by Rebecca Ross.

Mary Heim 49:03

So this one is for sure. On my list. I have a river enchanted Up for February because I feel like it's gonna be cold and miserable. It'd be perfect for that. But now you and Kaytee, both put Divine Rivals. So I'm excited to discover Rebecca Ross this year.

Mary Heim 50:40

Yes, can't wait. All right, Roxanna, are we at your number one we are.

Roxanna Kassam Kara 50:46

So my number one bumping up is Search by Michelle Huneven. So this is a favorite here currently reading. So I won't talk too much about the setup. This is the only book I read twice this year. And it's for sure. I think that's what rocketed it to favorite book of the year. This was also a great surprise to me, I did not expect a book about the search for a minister of a church to be as compelling as this book was. And I also did not expect it to be so relevant to many situations in my life. Ultimately, I love books about religious search, because they give me a peek into group dynamics and how humans operate and navigate difficult situations together. And that's what this book was about. Right? It was a book about a group of well meaning individuals who sincerely want to choose the best Minister they can for their church. And you see them on this journey. And then you see some choices they're making that you think well, maybe this is suboptimal. Like, why are there you know, 10 people on this committee? Oh, maybe this person isn't really pulling their weight. But okay, let's let that go and see how things go. And, you know, you see how the every little choice that they make or choices, they don't make, how that leads this ultimate decision that really has its own impact. I'll just say that. And that last vote about who's become the minister was so nail biting, really, like I was up till two in the morning, it really talks to the dangers of consensus, I'm not setting up rules. There's a lot more to this book, like I'm sure other people will read it. Or like Roxanna, I don't know what you're talking about. Like, this is not what I got out of this book at all. But for me, because I approach books like that, that's what it what it meant to me, but I just really loved how Huneven kind of put all this in a church setting and pull this stuff out. It really had me on the edge of my seat. And I will say the recipes are phenomenal, which is not something I've said before, they're really good. There's a recipe in the back for this church potluck staple called Fiesta chicken, which I make all the time. And these homemade chocolate chip cookies, which are amazing. So it's really good. I wish I wish the main character was my best friend and I loved it so much. I'll probably read it every few years again from now on. And that Search by Michelle Huneven

Mary Heim 52:50

you know all of the chatter in our community and with the other hosts about this book. I have not read this one yet, but it was our I was like, Okay, there's enough here that I need to get to this one. But it's sounding again, Roxanna, I think you've just sold me on this being like, no, no, no, we're gonna get to this one immediately. I cannot wait to dig in. Oh, what a great topic. I love that.

Roxanna Kassam Kara 53:11

I really think for you, Mary, I was going to suggest it just given your day job. And you know how I just think it would be really, really fascinating for you, because I bet you you could see some of the things coming before. And I'd love to chat about it with you. So maybe I'll read Divine Rivals and you read Search, and then we'll we'll chat. Perfect.

Mary Heim 53:30

And then I'll send you a voice message. I love it. Yeah, exactly. Well, Roxanna, my top Book of the Year this year is *After This*, like Claire Bidwell Smith. Now I have raved about this book before on the big show. And it was one of those books that as soon as I finished it, I knew I was like, This is my topic of the year. This is it, nothing else is going to compare. I spoke in depth about this one on the episode where Kaytee and I talked about grief and reading. But if you miss that original setup after this is written by a leading grief therapist, exploring her own experience her own grief after losing both of her parents before the age of 25. This author intersperses reflections on her lived experience with all sorts of kinds of alternative therapies and exploration and kind of trying to answer these big questions about life and death and after and while we're here and marries it with these letters to her young daughters now as a parent herself in between each chapter, I read this one immediately after my dad passed, and honestly, while I would recommend it to anyone, I'm hesitant to ever pick it up again and read it again. Now because of how acutely and perfectly this book meant me exactly where I was in a very specific moment in time. It's not to say I won't reread it because I feel drawn to picking it up again and think oh, I should go back and read that chapter or this letter. Just felt so resonant but I want to hold space for it to just kind of exist here for a little while, as this book that was such a life raft to me in 2023. You know, I've heard someone before describe their favorite books as hard to print books. And that is this one for me. So many of my books of this past year reflected the fact that I was reading in the hardest year of my life. And I'm going to be honest, I mentioned this to you, before we started recording Roxanna, I was almost hesitant as I was collecting this list that anybody really wants to hear me talk about all of these grief books, or all of this grief I found in all of these books. But I also think that it's so beautifully captures how well my reading guided me through this difficult year through these last 10 months. And I am so grateful for how well my books, and my reading helped me this year. And this one is the epitome of that for me, that is *After This* by Claire Bidwell Smith,

Roxanna Kassam Kara 55:37

Will you for sure put this on my list. There's a lot of these grief books that I think I actually picked up a lot from Mary, you sharing your journey. And I think for all four of us this year, our books really told a story of what we went through this year, right? Like you, you have a lot of books, obviously about grief and dealing with that and processing it. I have a lot of books about choosing your life path and living to your values and questioning, and kind of you know, ultimately getting to satisfaction and contentment with your life. You know, Meredith talked a lot about how she went through a hard year and was reading for escape, and a lot of her books immersed her and got her through hard period, as it Kaytee with her, you know, multiple moves, she really needed her books to be an escape for her. So I think now I'm learning I used to read these lists when I was younger, like, okay, these are the best books for this person, you should read them, they're going to be just as great for you. And then you know, I would read them and not find that. And now of course, as more of a seasoned reader, I can say of course not because these are the books that met you where they were not to say there are some books that meet a lot of people where they aren't like *Tom Lake* and *Covenant of Water*. But there's some books that are so personal, whether it's a big life change you're going through, or just something that you're maybe just sitting on is a seed and it brings it to the forefront. Books are so much a reflection of what we're going through and how we process it and how we move through life. And I think top 10 lists really show that more than anything else.

Mary Heim 57:23

Absolutely. I don't think I could have said that better. Myself. Roxanna, I think that's something that's special to us as readers right is like how our books hold space for us and give us space to process and be and be seen and what a beautiful world that we live in, have these, you know, multitudinous options of what we can choose to read and be seen or write a mirror or window, see others experiences and grow and expand. And I feel especially kind of schmoopy looking back at these lists, and talking about that with you and really seeing and feeling that gratitude that I think we all have for the way that our books were so here for us this year. And it makes me eager to maybe someday be able to look back at those, you know, I've got a growing kind of collection of top 10 lists since I've started doing this in the last 10 years or so to see like, Hmm, this is really where I was this year, and kind of moving through life and reflecting back that way. But yes, how lucky we are. I've loved getting to hear all of these great books from you and sharing these books. And I can't wait to hear what of our lists have resonated with our readers if we had any crossover on our top 10 books of the year. And of course listeners, we hope that you have already listened to Meredith and kaytee share their top books of 2023. And again, we would love to hear from you on social media all about yours. Come find us in our DMS. If you have thoughts about any of our opinions today, you know we'd love to hear it.

Mary Heim

As a reminder here is where you can connect with us. You can find Kaytee at @notesonbookmarks on Instagram, and Meredith is at @MeredithMondaySchwartz. You can find me Mary at @Maryreadsandsips

Roxanna Kassam Kara 59:02

and you can find me at @Roxannathereader on Instagram full show notes with the title of every book we

Mary Heim 59:07

mentioned in the episode, and timestamps so that you can zoom right to where we talked about them can be found at currentlyreadingpodcast.com. You

Roxanna Kassam Kara 59:15

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Roxanna Kassam Kara 59:32

bookish friends are the best friends. Thank you for helping us grow and get closer to our goals.

Mary Heim 59:37

Until next week, may your coffee be hot

Roxanna Kassam Kara 59:39
and your book be unputdownable

Mary Heim 59:41
Happy reading Roxanna,

Roxanna Kassam Kara 59:42
happy reading Mary