



Season 4, Episode 25: Fits and Starts + Remembering What We Read

Mon, 1/31 • 1:03:00

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 00:24

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

Meredith Monday Schwartz 00:31

Those supporters who we call Bookish Friends make the podcast happen when they spend \$5 a month on Patreon and they get tons of bonus content in return.

Kaytee Cobb 00:40

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

Meredith Monday Schwartz 00:45

I'm Meredith Monday Schwartz, a mom of four and full time CEO living in Austin, Texas, and my reading in 2022 can best be described as fits and starts.

Kaytee Cobb 00:55

And I'm Kaytee Cobb, a homeschooling mom of four living in New Mexico and I've nicknamed my Kindle as "my precious." This is episode number 25 of season four and we're so glad you're here.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 01:06

Is that your actual name, like through the Amazon devices part? Is that the actual name?

Kaytee Cobb 01:11

Yeah. So when I say, "deliver to my precious,"

Meredith Monday Schwartz 01:14

I like that. That's good. That's very good.

Kaytee Cobb 01:17

It's fun. Yours is your oasis right? Meredith's oasis.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 01:19

Yes.

Kaytee Cobb 01:21

I love that too.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 01:22

Okay, well, we are going to talk about all kinds of things later on, but we wanted to let you know right up at the top that our deep dive is today is going to be a topic we've never tackled before on the show in almost four years of doing it. We're going to talk about how we interact with our books beyond just reading them. So we're talking about note taking, annotating. Do we do this? Do we not do it? Is it dumb? Is it smart? All the things. So we're going to talk about that later in the show. But first, let's talk about our bookish moments of the week. Kaytee, what's been going on in your book life?

Kaytee Cobb 01:57

Okay, my bookish moment this week is kind of a perpetual bookish moment. But it does have to do with my Kindle. And people are always excited to learn about this thing. You know what I'm going to talk about here, Meredith, because it's buzzing in the bookish friends today. If you bought a Kindle that is ad supported, because you saved \$20 on it, you can take off those ads at any time by removing them through the Amazon store. You pay 20 bucks one time, and then you no longer have to have either a dumb romance cover that you are not interested in your children's seeing on the lock screen, which is a terrible, terrible thing. Yep, I do not appreciate that at all. Thank you so much Amazon, or the one that makes me really, really mad is the woman with a telescope, but she's looking at the sky and the telescope is pointed at her nether regions. And it just infuriates me to see that as a saved like Kindle lockscreen cover. And so you can pay one time, and it will show the cover of the book you're currently reading. Or if you're like me, and you read a lot of galleys, it just shows a very neutral, but book adjacent stock image like printing press blocks, or newspapers all stacked up together or pretty pencils all together with their sharpened tips. And that little thing brings me bookish joy, which makes it a bookish moment, but it's like a, it's like an ongoing one. Every time I open my Kindle, I am happy to look at the cover with the typewriter keys on it or whatever it's showing that's not an ad for an Amazon dumb romance.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 03:26

Right. So I have two things to say about this. I completely agree. I said in the bookish friends group today, I think it's money very well spent. Because I feel like one of the things that you miss when you read on a Kindle, and I love reading on my my Oasis, is that you miss seeing the cover all the time. So I like the fact, I paid that \$20, every time I open it up, I see the cover of whatever book I was last reading on my Kindle. So I like that. As a person who does marketing for living, though, here's my further problem with those ads that they serve. Right? The thing is that they make the majority of their money not on actually selling books, but on being really smart marketers. Instead of serving all of us

apparently the same stupid bodice ripper, I'm not saying bodice rippers are stupid, but the covers are the books that they're trying to sell to us, just not ones that I'm going to buy is the point that I'm trying to make. But they have so much data on me on each of us. Why isn't that ad serving me a book that I might actually want to buy in a format that is attractive to the eye and gives me maybe a blurb of said book and a button that says buy now or sample now. So just as a marketer, that's the problem that I have. It's such a huge, massive missed opportunity. And yet someone somewhere decided because you know, they're making money on the ads that they're serving, but I just have a feeling that those could be being done better. Not that I want to work for Amazon. But I really think that this one idea could do a lot for them not like they also need my help making more money, nor do I want to help them make more money. But this is the crawl in my side about this particular thing. So I absolutely agree those \$20 are \$20 very well spent to get rid of that.

Kaytee Cobb 05:23

Right. And you too, could have a bookish moment every time you open your Kindle by not having to see those ads.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 05:29

Right, exactly. Now, do you know Kaytee, do you know if you, is it like a setting where you can either decide to see the cover of the book that you're most recently reading? Or they have some some of those really beautiful kind of sketchy you know, illustrations like you were talking about? Because I feel like I never see those anymore. Is that a setting?

Kaytee Cobb 05:49

Yeah, so it's a simple toggle in your device settings. You can just click a little switch that switches from "display the cover of my current read", on or off. And that'll decide if you have those pretty stock cover photos, or the cover of the book you're currently reading.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 06:03

Alright, so my bookish moment of week, first of all, is just a quick comment fits and starts. That is the theme for my reading. But we normally use that phrase, I think there's a implied negativity there. I am finding that as I'm leaning into only reading books that feel really right to me, I am not right now-ing more books than ever. And the net effect of that is I have to do that a few times before I hit on the thing that's really working for me. And so it feels like my reading is fits and starts where I'm kind of starting a few books, and they're not right, they're not right, and then I land on the one that is right. So it's a little bit of a different rhythm to my reading. But I'm not, I'm not finding that to be negative. Because what I am finding is when I land on the book that's feels really right, with no hesitation, it feels really, really right. And sometimes I'm finding, it's a book that I'm not expecting. So it's going to be an interesting thing to watch this year, I do think this is going to be a real change in my reading and watch my stats and see if it means I'm reading more quality books.

Kaytee Cobb 07:09

I bet that is what you're going to find which I will be excited about. I just finished a book today that I probably should have abandoned and/or not right now. And I wish I had not pushed through so hard to try and finish it so well.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 07:24

One of the things that I mean, I've been leaning this direction for a long time. But one of the things there was a meme or a graphic going around in the last week, week and a half, where people were talking about exactly this. If you started a book and it doesn't feel really right, lay it down. Not only because you might pick it up at a time when it's more right for you, but also because the author would really appreciate you doing that. And for some reason that spoke to me. Like Amor Towles, my boy for my book boyfriend, he didn't want me to read his book back in 2016, A Gentleman in Moscow when I wasn't ready. He wanted me to wait until 2021 when I was very ready, right? So it's just another way to look at that. Hey, I want to let you want know one thing adjacent to my bookish moment of the week or side by side with it. The Edgar Award nominations came out this week, which is probably the only award book award that I take very, very seriously. I don't, I never read all of them, but I pay attention to it. So I wanted to just kind of put here that the Edgar Award nominations came out the best nominees for Best Book of the Year are two these are by the Mystery Writers of America. That's who does the Edgar awards. So their nominees are The Venice Sketchbook by Rhys Bowen which is historical mystery. Razorblade Tears by S.A Cosby, Five Decembers by James Kestrel, which is very interesting, very hard boiled, like very hard boiled detective. It's kind of very interesting throwback cover. That's an interesting one. How Lucky by Will Leach and No One Will Miss Her by Kat Rosenfield. Both of those last two people have DM'd me about and and in both cases people have said, "If you're thinking about it, read it because you'll love it," or "If you're thinking about it don't because you'll hate it." So both of those books, it was interesting that they ended up on this list.

Kaytee Cobb 09:18

Interesting. I feel like I've been hearing a lot about How Lucky lately so I'm interested in that one even though I haven't read a set up. I haven't looked into it at all. It's just been kind of buzzing around like a gnat.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 09:30

Right I actually I mean a lot of people have really really really loved it. So both of those are ones that I want to look into so yeah. Be interested in those. The Edgar Awards are meaningful because oftentimes, I think they really are choosing books that maybe I hadn't I hadn't heard of before but really are very high quality. So that's an award I pay attention to. Okay, are you ready to talk about our current reads?

Kaytee Cobb 09:55

I am. I'm excited to talk books of course like always.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 09:59

Alright, Excellent. What do you want to start us out with this week?

Kaytee Cobb 10:01

Okay, the first one that I want to talk about this week is called *You Got Anything Stronger?* by Gabrielle Union with the question mark. Right. This is a collection of personal essays memoir style from the actress that I first got to know way back when I was in high school with one of the greatest lines in *10 Things I Hate About You*. She says, "I know you can be underwhelmed, and you can be overwhelmed. But can you ever just be whelmed." I love that line. So I have been using it now for 25 years still love it. Here she gets vulnerable and forthright with her readers in ways that we don't expect, especially from a like silly piffy off the cuff line like that, as the only way I really know her. We start out strong with her journey with infertility and finding her surrogate and having her daughter. I say this, I point out this essay specifically to make it really clear that some readers will have a really hard time, especially with the very first essay. You could totally either skip it, or not go into this book at all, knowing that this essay may or may not be for you. Any type of way about it, you're totally good. I listened to this one on audio and as you can expect from a celebrity author, she narrates it herself, which definitely adds to the experience and makes you feel more connected to her as a reader or listener. After that first infertility essay, we've got essays about aging as a woman, especially married to a man who is younger than her, which I found really fascinating because they had a very large age difference between her and her husband. We've got Black representation in Hollywood. We've got stories about being married to a sportsball player. Her husband played for the Miami Heat as a basketball player. Dwayne Wade right.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 11:37

She's married to Dwayne Wade. Yes, you did. Did you really just call him a sportsball player?

Kaytee Cobb 11:41

I love the phrase sportsball. They use it a lot on *The Popcast*. Of course, I know the difference between football and basketball and baseball and I can watch any of them. And I know the rules. But I like that, like sportsball is so overarching. I just think it's such a funny phrase. So I was I've been waiting basically to talk about sports ball for five years now.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 12:04

You did that perfectly. You just inserted it in perfectly.

Kaytee Cobb 12:07

Yeah, exactly. Basically, she's opening up all the aspects of her life in timely and heartfelt essays. And it's really well done. The only reason this wasn't a total hit out of the parks in my sportsball metaphor there for me is that that essay format, as opposed to straight memoir is we jump quite a bit around in time. So sometimes we are right in the time leading up to her daughter's birth. And then her daughter is three years old. And then it's 20 years before that, and she's just getting like, into her first marriage. It's just very scattered feeling. If you listen straight through.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 12:42

Is it thematically organized, instead of chronologically?

Kaytee Cobb 12:45

No, it's just kind of hopping around from story to story. So it's hard to keep it all straight in your head. It might be easier to do one essay a day and just be like, "Okay, now I've learned about that little facet of her life and I will set that aside and tomorrow I will come and meet Gabrielle Union from a new angle." Because listening to it straight through like I did, it's just confusing. You know, it's hard to follow. All that being said, by the end, I was neither overwhelmed nor underwhelmed, but I had enjoyed moments of teary, heartfelt emotion and laugh out loud ones as well. So I agree, You Got Anything Stronger? Pick this one up by Gabrielle Union.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 13:27

You were just whelmed by it.

Kaytee Cobb 13:28

I was whelmed adequately.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 13:31

Yeah, I think we should start using that term a lot because it's actually it actually fits for a lot of books. I wasn't overwhelmed. I wasn't underwhelmed, I was just whelmed. I like it.

Kaytee Cobb 13:41

What's your first book, Meredith?

Meredith Monday Schwartz 13:43

Okay, Kaytee. I am going to talk about a book that I really, really liked but I never and I mean, never would have picked this up completely on my own. I read *The Monk of Mokha* by Dave Eggers. This is a biography. But the way that it's written using that word feels like square peg round hole because I think of something drier and dustier when I think of a biography and I know you don't like biography Kaytee. You would love this book. Okay. This is my point about it. So *The Monk of Mokha*. So Roxanna and her husband had read it, and really, really liked it, and she told me about it like a year ago, and I was sort of like, "Uh huh. I'll check it out," you know?

Kaytee Cobb 14:31

Before y'all were friends?

Meredith Monday Schwartz 14:34

She told me, no, we were already friends, but I just was uninterested, completely uninterested. But then like, eight months later, she was like, "Look, Meredith, I know you blew me off last time when I just told you about this book, but I just really need for you to give this book a try. Just give it a try." And it was nonfiction which of course is not always in my in my you know wheelhouse of my mood. But let me tell you what it's about. So this biography is about a man young man whose name is Mokhtar Alkhanshali. And when our book starts, he's 24. And he's working as a doorman at a building in San Francisco. He has no idea what he wants to do with his life. But by pure happenstance, he stumbles upon the astonishing history of coffee, and his native Yemen's central place in that history of coffee. So Mokhtar

leaves San Francisco and he travels deep into the country of Yemen, his homeland, to tour terrace farms, high in the country's rugged mountains and he meets the most amazing farmers who are battling the elements and the markets and their government trying to make a living selling this amazing crop of coffee. But then war engulfs Yemen, and Saudi bombs are raining down on the country and Mokhtar has to find a way out without losing his company, his dreams, his life, or abandoning these people that he has come to love. Oh, I am so glad that I started reading this. So I listened to this. And I definitely recommend it on audio because it is narrated by a fantastic narrator who just has the most beautiful of the man with the most beautiful voice. And his pronunciation of these Yemeni words is just gorgeous. So this is definitely one of those works of nonfiction that reads exactly like fiction. In fact, I would challenge someone if they didn't know, to dip into chapter two and not think that they're listening to work of fiction. You care so much about Mokhtar from the very beginning, as Dave Eggers describes his days as a boy growing up in the Tenderloin in San Francisco. That's where my husband grew up. And so there was a lot of personal connection for me there. And you were there for Mokhtar for every single step of his journey, trying to figure out what he wanted to do. His parents really needed for him to get this figured out. And you can just feel that moment where you're like, I want to be on a path, but I don't know what that path is. And more importantly, you're amazed at how he figures out what he how he wants to go about it once he figures out what he wants to do. When I was listening to this, I kept thinking how amazing it was that Mokhtar had the courage to do what he did, given that he knew nothing about business at all, and nothing about the coffee industry when he entered into it. So few people have this level of bravery, myself included, to start a business at all, let alone one in a far flung war torn country that's known for being really difficult to do business in. But this is the ultimate American story. It's the ultimate immigrant story too, which makes it the ultimate American story. It's the story of the American dream. The fact that he made a success of himself based in his own country, using resources made from the country his family came from, is nothing less than miraculous and beautiful. But Kaytee, the story's not just miraculous and beautiful. It is so interesting, on 10 levels all the way through. If you love to learn while you read, if that's something that is really, really important to you, there are so many things to learn in this book. There are a lot of great details about Yemen and the coffee industry and about starting a business. That's just absolutely fantastic if that kind of thing is your jam. I'm so glad that Roxana pushed me more than once to read this book. Again, I recommend it on audio. This is one that I will remember for a long time and more and more I am realizing that that single factor is affecting my star ratings a lot. Did this book make an impression on me that will last? This one definitely did. This is *The Monk of Mokha* by Dave Eggers.

Kaytee Cobb 19:09

Interesting. Okay. I have a lot to say about this. Okay. All right. First is that Dave Eggers, of course has been on my radar, you know, before. I've never read anything by him. While you were talking though, I did borrow the audio book. Okay. Yeah, because part of it. I just recently talked to Mindy about what things that can affect my star ratings, right? And overhype is definitely one of those. So part of it. The reason that I will borrow literally while we're talking to each other is because I don't want it to get out to the bookish friends 10 days from now, and have everybody say, oh my gosh, I loved that book that Meredith talked about so much. And because that'll ruin it for me. So I have to do it right now before they all hear about it. Right?

Meredith Monday Schwartz 19:51

This is one of those books that I don't think is going to be another *Into the Drowning Deep* but I do think for people who love this kind of book, I feel like it is under the radar. And it's one that I think will be really, really successful for people. The other thing is that speaking of Dave Eggers, as an author, I actually many times completely forgot that he was the one writing it. I actually am not a big Dave Eggers fan. You know, the most recent book I've read by him was *The Circle*, which is not it didn't come out super came out a few years, several years ago. But Dave Eggers doesn't like to let you forget that he's the one writing. He's very front and center in his own writing style. And so I kept remarking to Roxanna, he disappeared into this story, and really let it be about Mokhtar and Mokhtar's family and the farmers and just the whole the ending scenes in this book, I actually was listening to it as I was coming out of the shower, and I ended up standing with a towel wrapped around me for like 20 minutes with just I could not do anything but listen to the end of this book. I was completely rapt. It was wrapped and I was rapt. Haha. And so it reads like fiction. It's shocking to me that this is nonfiction. He Dave Eggers did a really good job on this book.

Kaytee Cobb 21:19

That's amazing. I'm excited to dive in. My next book is called *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain*. And it's by George Saunders. This book is so strange. And so wonderful. I gave it four stars, but honestly, I did not know how to rate it. Okay. George Saunders is a writer in his own right. Of course, his most famous work is probably *Lincoln in the Bardo*, also for being strange and wonderful. This is completely different. Here we enter seven short stories written by Russians. But that's not the point of this book. Instead, just like the students of his Russian short story class that he's been teaching for more than 20 years, George Saunders takes us by the hand and teaches us the art of the short story. Now, this is an older white dude who's been teaching for more than two decades. And I would posit that he likes to hear himself talk. There are times in this book that I wonder if he could have taken his own advice about great writing and editing and pulled himself in a little bit, right? Maybe maybe we didn't need that many sentences about the one page of this story, George, right? But he could have made those paragraphs more succinct and more powerful. With that being said, I also truly enjoyed pulling apart these stories piece by piece. He has his reader slash student, look at them page by page, or paragraph by paragraph, and he has us pull them apart and then put them back together, reassemble them. If you change the order here, how does it change the story? If you pull out some of the adjectives, what happens to this sentence, right? Like minutiae of short stories, because they're such a fine art. All of that is a really powerful tool and a way of looking at writing and story. And that's what made me enjoy this book. After spending nearly a year reading short stories in community with the short story sisters, for all of us to cap off the year with this book, it felt a little like we were either vindicated, or like we could have written it, and a little like, maybe we should have read it at the very beginning of the year instead of the end of the year. I think that this book has made me a better reader. And it makes for better writing for the writerly inclined people in the audience. I heard about it, of course from Laura Tremaine, who is a writer and loved reading this book. She ranked it as one of her top books of 2021. I also really enjoyed the experience of looking at what makes great light writing through the lens of a professor and a writer. And for that reason, I'm really glad I read it. So it's *A Swim in a Pond in the Rain* by George Saunders.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 23:53

Now, did you listen to it or did you have a physical copy or did you tandem read?

Kaytee Cobb 23:58

I attempted to tandem read, but my library copy was called back before I could finish. So I started it on paper, finished it on Kindle and audio, but mostly audio, so I don't recommend that format. It was, it was best when I was listening to it and had the paper in front of me.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 24:15

Right. And that was the recommendation that I got from Liz Hein. She recommended that book to me. I actually have it waiting for me. I love Lincoln in the Bardo. And I love I was an English major. So I like exactly what this book does. So I'm waiting for the exact right time for it, but a tandem read for some of the reasons we're going to talk about in the deep dive, I think this is a great example. Yes, you know, where interacting with the book in a specific way can really change your experience with it.

Kaytee Cobb 24:43

And I think Lincoln in the Bardo is best tandem read as well to have sure the text in front of you so you can follow who's supposed to be talking but then to have that full cast audio recording that has all those amazing actors and voice actors in it. That's the best way to read his work. Apparently, those are the only two I read from him, but I like them both.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 25:01

Yeah, no, I read Lincoln in the Bardo and really, really loved it, and then listened to it, but I didn't do that. I think that tandem, that would have been the best way to do it. So Okay. All right, Kaytee, I think in the history of the show, we've never done three back to back nonfiction current reads.

Kaytee Cobb 25:19

I don't think we have.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 25:20

Right. See, this is January. This is my theory is that January is a lot of people read nonfiction in January. So I'm going to take us in a completely different direction. George Saunders is not going to be reading this next book, but he should. He should, because it's really, really good. I read The Kingdom by Jess Rothenburg. Do you know this book Kaytee?

Kaytee Cobb 25:41

I think so. I think Mary brought it to the show.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 25:44

I think I think Mary did bring it to the show. If you look at the cover, you're going to be reminded of it. This is that place where Mary and I we don't have a ton of overlap in our reading. But we have a really strong place of overlap. And this book falls into that place. Here's the setup. So you guys know, I love any book that's based on a theme park. I don't know. I don't know why. But it is such catnip for me. And

this book, of course has it in spades. All right. So our park this time around is called The Kingdom. And it's an immersive fantasy theme park, where you can really go and just deep dive into the whole castle princess experience. Okay, you can ride on virtual dragons, you can go into these incredibly real castles. And they even have bio-engineered species, like species that were formerly extinct, roaming free in the park. So our lead character is Anna, and she is one of seven fantasists. These are these very beautiful AI princesses who are engineered to make the guests dreams come true. But trouble starts to brew when Anna meets a park employee whose name is Owen, and she begins to experience emotions that are way outside of her programming because remember, Anna is AI. She falls in love with Owen. But this fairy tale really quickly turns into a nightmare because Anna is accused of murdering Owen and a huge trial that gets so much publicity follows. The book is told through courtroom testimony, interviews, and Anna's own memories of Owen. And what emerges is a story of love, lies, cruelty, corporate greed, and what it truly means to be human. I loved this book. This book is just exactly the kind of book that I love as a palate cleanser, because the pages absolutely fly. It's got super short chapters. It reads so quick. I read this in two settings. So milkshake book, that is what we have here. It also marries everything you love about Jurassic Park with everything that you love about Disney princesses. It's got the same corporate greed, the same public desire for entertainment, no matter what the cost, right, we can all see, just like with Jurassic Park, we can all see what's going to go wrong. But here, we're all supposed to just ignore it and just look at the pretty pretty princesses. There were so many interesting details for park nerds like me. So if you like Disney, and you really really love all those behind the scenes details, there's a lot of that in this book for you. Also, I'll point out that this book is not gory, but it's interesting all the way through. And that's the sweet spot that a lot of readers are looking for. So HSPs you'll be okay with this book. I found myself rooting very much for our lead character Anna, which is strange for me because I don't normally jive with the AI kind of characters. I felt sorry for her in a way that I wasn't sure I would ever feel for an AI kind of robot character. I also loved so the format like I said the short chapters, the mixed media format, including the trial and interview transcripts, again, adds to how fast a read this is. And also there's one specific character in this book that had me guessing the whole way through and it just had me turning the pages. In fact, at the end, I was going back and rereading and double checking certain passages to see if I'd gotten certain things right or wrong. Jess Rothenberg really did a great job in this book. I will also say that this book is now top of my list whenever I have a mama of a older teenager who, girl usually but boys or girls would love this who want this kind of story. This is one you can absolutely put in their hands. They love it. If you wanted to buddy read it with them, there's lots of things to talk about, which I always think it's great. So this one was a big light frothy milkshake hit for me. This was The Kingdom by Jess Rothenberg.

Kaytee Cobb 30:07

It sounds so good. I mean, Mary made it sound great. You made it sound great. I can't even explain why I haven't picked this up yet. I do like knowing that it's a mixed media format that makes me more likely to want to find it on paper so that I can flip like you said, yeah.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 30:23

Yeah. All right. What's your third book?

Kaytee Cobb 30:25

Okay, my third one Meredith is a hugging book. It's Once Upon a Wardrobe by Patti Callahan. So Page and Palette put this on our November Indie Press List selections. And I knew right then that it would be the perfect choice for a buddy read for the bookish friends. In that group, we started 2021 with a buddy read of The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe by CS Lewis. So this book brought it full circle because we finished the year with a buddy read of Once Upon a Wardrobe by Patti Callahan. So we got to check out the world around Lewis's life as he was making The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe. This is not Patti Callaghan's first foray into writing historical fiction around CS Lewis. She also wrote Becoming Mrs. Lewis about his wife. This time, we're pulled into his story through George and Megs. George is a very sick little boy. Eight years old, he can hardly leave his bed. He's going to die soon. So he travels without leaving his bed through the power of story, especially his new favorite, the brand new release The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe. When his sister Megs comes home to visit from her studies at Oxford University, where she is very serious and logical, and studying maths, he tells her that he is sure that Narnia has to have come from somewhere. So he sends her on a mission. Go find CS Lewis, who was teaching at Oxford at the time, and asked him about it. Where did Narnia come from? Where did Aslan come from? How did you make this world? Since it's the only wish of her dying brother, Megs sets herself upon a mission, and the way it unfolds is wondrous. Well, this is a story, a historical fiction novel about CS Lewis and his life as a child especially. It's also about the much broader themes of the power of books and reading and story. When Megs meets CS Lewis, and tells him about her brother, he replies, let us give your brother some stories to carry with him on his journey. And what follows will make any readers heart explode with gratitude. This book, so many wonderful things to say about it, but I'll end with yes, this is a crying book, and a hugging book. No, you do not sit at a bedside and watch a child take his last breath. Nearly 50 bookish friends showed up live to chat with me about this book on Zoom. And happily, Patti Callahan joined us for the first 30 minutes of that conversation and let us into her process and her delight in writing the book. I am so grateful to her, and to the dear friends who shared their hearts and even shed some tears on Zoom, which I know sounds a little woowoo to be like crying with people you don't know on Zoom, but it was great. This book was perfect for when I finished it, which was Christmas Eve, but it would be equally perfect for any cold snowy evening. I loved it. I cannot recommend it enough. It's Once Upon a Wardrobe by Patti Callahan.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 33:16

Okay, lots of people really loved this book.

Kaytee Cobb 33:19

So many people love this book. It was beloved.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 33:22

But I'm going to tell you something. I did not like this book at all. It was everything that is not for me. Which means it's not for a lot of people. It's really not for me, Kaytee. It was just too sweet. It was the boy dying. It all you know what it is? I felt manipulated. Now, I'm sure that's not what she was trying to do. She was trying to tell and she seems like a really wonderful person who writes great books. There's nothing wrong with this book. It just was solidly not for me.

Kaytee Cobb 34:01

It's not a Meredith book.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 34:03

Oh, man, but it's not. It's not like I can't well, and when I read that book and didn't like it, near Christmas time, I felt horrible. Because I felt like it's such a likeable book. It's such a likeable time of year. I just I don't know, I feel very hateful but like I didn't hate it, or I didn't You didn't hate it. It just was so not for me and I just was like, "Oh, this this is just exactly why I don't like books like this," because I feel like there was someone who was like, Uh huh, here it goes. "Yep, here comes the tears. Bring on the waterworks," and I just anytime I feel like that it just turns me off. And there was just something so sweet about it. Oh, it just I didn't like this book at all. But a lot of people love it.

Kaytee Cobb 34:58

And it's I mean this is, this is like your your ASMR rooms, right? And you could pick an ASMR room that is a witch's cottage and that is delightful and delicious. And you could pick one that is like Narnia on Christmas Eve. And that's what this book is where it is very atmospheric. It's very emotional. It's very, the thing that was my favorite about it was how much Patti Callahan especially talked about the power of story, she gave CS Lewis especially these lines, and George about how transformative it is to pick up a book and to be taken somewhere else by that book. And so my copy is full of book darts, which I realize we're going to talk about in a second, and almost all of them I flipped through it again today, are sentences about the power of story and and why that's so pivotally wonderful for someone who loves reading. But if you already know that, like you don't have to be preached that. Meredith you already know how great a story is.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 36:04

But I do like those portions and I really did love the portions that centered on CS Lewis and his brother. I really liked those portions. You know what, it was the relationship between what was the little dying boy,

Kaytee Cobb 36:19

George is the dying boy. And Megs is his sister.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 36:21

Those two, I was just like, Oh, my God, just get a room. Like I there was something about that. I mean, not really. But you know what I mean? Like, there was something about the age difference. And then that just was too much. It was just too much. It was just too much. It just felt like I was just too much. But anyway, I'm glad that you loved and at the time I knew how much you loved it. I knew how much all the bookish friends loved it. I love that so much. Because like I am definitely never want to yuck anyone's yum. So just because it wasn't the book for me does not mean it's not fantastic. It just wasn't the book for me. Different though than not right now. This will never be the book. I finished it. But this is a book that I can strongly say would fall into the category of it wasn't just the wrong time. This is just one of those few sections where it's just not going to be for me, but it sold really well through the Indie Press.

Kaytee Cobb 37:19

Yeah, and a lot of people showed up, that was my biggest Zoom that I've ever had. And having the author there was really great.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 37:25

And she was lovely. It was it was absolutely a fantastic book to read as a group. So I'm glad we did it. And I'm glad we're having this conversation because I do want people to know that even when it's an Indie Press List book, even when it's a book, Kaytee that you really love or vice versa. We're still gonna have a strong opinion, but we still make room for each other because I love that you loved this. My last book. My last book for this week is a book that is strongly in my wheelhouse and probably would not be a book that you would gravitate at. This book is called Girl 11 by Amy Suiter Clarke. I did this one on audio and I very much recommended in that format. This is one of those books that if you want to go out for really long walks, even when it's super cold outside, strap this book onto your head because you will absolutely be walking forever. Here's the setup.

Kaytee Cobb 38:17

But only on audio, because if you strap a paper book on your head, you'll look like a total weirdo.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 38:23

Don't do that. Alright, here's the setup. Our lead character is Elle Castillo and she had a career as a social worker. She worked with young trauma victims, victims of violent crime. But now she hosts a popular True Crime podcast that focuses on cold cases of missing and abducted children. She's very, very passionate about this and it's become very popular. So after four seasons of successfully solving these cases in Minnesota's Twin Cities, again, perfect time of year to be reading this, Elle decides to tackle her own personal white whale, the True Crime story of the Countdown Killer. 20 years ago, the killer now known as TCK was terrorizing the Twin Cities area kidnapping and murdering three girls over seven days each a year younger than the last. And then after he took his 11 year old victim, the pattern and the murders abruptly stopped. No one has ever known why he stopped or how he got away with all of these crimes. With the popularity of Elle's podcast now in the present time, new tips start to pour in. And when Elle follows up on one of those and discovers a man's dead body, she feels she might be in over her head. Then within days a child is abducted, a young girl who seems to fit suspiciously into the TCK sequence that had stopped decades before. And Elle is compelled to help law enforcement try to stop him, this time for good. Okay, This book is a wild ride. It's super fast, riveting read. I absolutely loved this one. It was very carefully plotted and very smart, but also reads like a thriller. So we're in hallowed ground here. We don't often get this kind of writing with this kind of propulsive story. I would use my new favorite term and describe this as crime fiction, because I think that it really fits better than what we normally consider a mystery or a thriller. It's fast moving and interesting, but it's also got some depth. I loved the main character Elle and her entire family and the way that this book concentrates mostly on the victims of the crimes and not on the killer himself. I also loved the podcast element. Done right, as it is here, I think it's really, really effective. We actually get to listen to podcast episodes, as well as peek into some of the engineering in the background, which is as a podcaster, that part was really fun. I, as I said, I listened to this one on audio. And I do think it's done best in that format, because the

production values were high. And this was a full cast recording, which I really, really enjoyed. I will say that I was fairly sure what direction we were going on a couple of fronts. But that didn't spoil my enjoyment of the book at all. The way it all wove together in the end was really satisfying. I will say, of course, that as with all serial killer novels, there are triggers by the dozen including child abduction and child harm, also drug use. So be aware of that before going in. While this wasn't the most graphic novel I've ever read, it was still not a book that you should go into lightly. But really anything about a serial killer, we probably know HSPs should stay away from right? If you love a tightly plotted crime fiction novel, if you really loved Jar of Hearts, but maybe want something just a little less intense. I would definitely try Girl 11 by Amy Suiter Clarke. Alright. Okay, so let's get into our deep dive. Today we are going to talk about annotating, note taking, interacting with books beyond just reading them with our eyeballs or with our ears. This is something that's come up recently for me, because although we're mentioning her twice in an episode, now, Roxanna is my buddy reading friend. She's the only person that I buddy read with. And we really share all of our reading life with each other through a set of daily voicemail messages. And so we tell each other about all the reading that we're doing. And one of the things that she was talking about is how she would highlight or annotate quotes that she really loved, for various reasons in the books that she was reading. And she would put them in a commonplace notebook, which was something that I had never done before. But as she talked about it more and more and read quotes to me from the commonplace notebook, I realized that there were a lot of times when I'm reading, that I run across those lines that just make you kind of stop. For whatever reason, there's a lot of reasons that that could happen. And I never do anything with them. So Kaytee, when you read, do you do you do any of this kind of interaction? Are you a highlighter? Book darter? Highlighting your Kindle kind of girl?

Kaytee Cobb 43:22

Oh, so I do like to interact with my books. I like to in a paper book, I like to have a pencil or a book dart, I will either underline or I will make marginalia notes about things. And I'll stick a book dart in the page so it's easier to find later. I do like to do that a lot, which is one of the few reasons that I would buy a book before I've read it so that I can mark it up and be mean to basically, but I'm really bad about going back and doing anything with those later. Like, I can be like, "Oh, I remember reading something about that. At one point, there was a really great quote, no idea how I'll ever find it again, too bad for me."

Meredith Monday Schwartz 44:02

Right. So this was something that was exactly in my way, all of this time. So two things, what you just said stuck out to me. The first thing you know, that I want to say is I want to kind of ask ourselves the question, when we markup a book, whether it's with book darts, or highlighters, or pencil or pen or marginalia, is that being mean to the book? Or is the book and I know that you said that in a joking way. Yeah. But I think that that's actually something that we as readers struggle with. Because I think from the time we're really young, we're taught to treat books really precious. Except when we're in college, and we're learning, we're taught to really interact with them in this physical way. And so I wonder if, in fact, it's not mean or damaging or any of those negative things to a book to interact with it in this way. I wonder if it actually if the book is like delighted and filled with joy because they feel like they're living. The book is living up to its bookish potential life. Yeah. Right. Like, "Yes, please mark me up. Make notes in me." Which leads me to the second thing that I want to say about this. I think that I in the past,

in order to interact with my books like this, I felt like, well, but why am I doing this? I'm not trying to memorize I'm not doing what I was doing in college where I was doing it, because I needed to memorize it for a test. So why am I doing it? And this is one of those things that Roxanna has really imparted to me, which is, she does a lot of her a lot of her interaction with the world, even in her business in her job, she does a lot of writing. And she would talk about how I had to write that down if I had any chance at remembering it or doing anything with that idea. And so it's the very act of the note taking, that puts it into our brain. And I know you know, this, Kaytee. You know this to be true. But I needed to tell myself, if you want to have some idea of that quote in your brain, I can't just read it. I have to have done something with it. And for me, just underlining is a part of it. But it's the actual writing it in my commonplace notebook, which I'm doing now, that really serves to get it into that new groove in my brain. So the result I'm getting is that I feel like I'm taking in my books, deeper, deeper into my brain than I was before.

Kaytee Cobb 46:37

Yes, I completely agree. And I, I do note that all the time in my life, like if I make a to do list on my phone, and I verbally tell my phone, you know, add prep for Episode 25, to my to do list, I am less likely to remember it. Even within that same day than if I sat down and made a physical written to do list and that it's the same thing. It's exactly the same thing where if you put pencil to paper, even the muscle memory of writing it down, puts it into your brain in a different way. Which is why I am very interested in a commonplace notebook and making sure to take time to transcribe and transpose the notes, sentences, phrases, whatever that caught me for whatever reason. Because even then you are more likely to remember it and even to be able to say, Oh, I remember reading about something like that. At some point, those will come more frequently. Right? Just because you wrote it down. I know when we had Roxanna on the show, which was Season Three, Episode Five, she talked about her commonplace index cards, and we we ended up putting a picture of them up on our Instagram. So that'll get linked in show notes. But she actually keeps things by topic, doesn't she and her commonplace notebook rather than by title. Is that right?

Meredith Monday Schwartz 47:56

You know, I don't know that she's doing that right now. But it may very well be. It may very well be that she has. I know that in her commonplace notebook she keeps a lot of different things. So she'll, you know, her quotes from what she's reading here. It's just one thing, she also keeps lists of words that really interest her. And so then later on, she'll go back and look at the etymology of the different words. And she'll write those things down. And she keeps all different kinds of lists. So she really has taken it like to another level. I'm kind of just keeping mine to I put, you know, different kinds of lists. When I want to break down ideas for a work idea, I have a section in my commonplace notebook, she bought me a Filofax notebook that works perfectly for this. And then I have this section for quotes. But one thing that I've learned, so when I transcribe them, I do that once a day, I try to transcribe whatever I've read from the day before. So on my Kindle whatever I've highlighted from the book that I'm reading, you can export your notes to a PDF, and then email that PDF to the email that you've told Amazon, this is the email that I want you to send my stuff to. So every day I just export a PDF that is then in my email, and then when I'm at my desk, I open that up, and then I transcribe it. And then my physical book, I make a difference between something I might just want to book mark or highlight, versus something that I

actually want to write down. So I'm actually highlighting a lot more than I'm transcribing. The ones I'm going to transcribe have to be really they have to be really, really special. Right, but um, but just the act of doing that has me underlining things that don't have to reach that level. But they do, just kind of they come to the surface for me, or they're memorable in some way. And I feel like I am remembering more of my books because I'm interacting with them in this way. It's just been really revelatory for me, because I think that historically I've interacted with my books that way, if they were nonfiction that I was trying to learn from. This is the thing I always had, why would I need to do this in fiction, if I'm not taking it for a class? The reality is because I want some some of these books that I'm reading, including the book that I'm reading right now, which I will be talking about on the show in the coming weeks. I just, I want it in myself, like I want it, I want this book in my body. And this is the closest way I know to do that, short of getting the words tattooed on my skin, which would be I think, a little bit over the top.

Kaytee Cobb 50:38

You'd look like one of those little graph scarves where it has like the full text of a book printed all over.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 50:43

Yeah. And then that's a little that's, that's more than I want to do. But this is a good solution for me.

Kaytee Cobb 50:49

Okay, so in your physical book are you also like once a day, kind of going back over that chunk that you read and choosing some things to put into your notebook?

Meredith Monday Schwartz 51:00

Right, so that's what I do. So anything that I underline is just something that I want to remember. But if I've underlined it, and book doted it, then I go back in that chunk that I read the day before, and just there's usually only maybe one or two, in however much I've read that really rise to that level. So it's not like I'm sitting there for long. I don't have long periods of time to do this. It's really maybe only 10 minutes a day that I'm devoting to this, but it has really increased my my joy in my reading.

Kaytee Cobb 51:30

And where do you picture that notebook going when it's full?

Meredith Monday Schwartz 51:35

I picture that I will always probably do this particular kind of notebook. And then my idea is that it'll live on my library shelves and over time, I think it would be really wonderful to have a whole bunch of these and what a gift, you know, to give to my family when I'm gone to have you know, I mean, if my grandmother had left journals of her favorite quotes of her of the books that she was reading, oh, my gosh, that would just be everything. So that's not why I'm doing it. But I think that that's a nice net effect.

Kaytee Cobb 52:07

Yeah. Yeah, I like that. I think even just having another conversation about it, you know how you have to hear something multiple times before it starts to sink in? Yeah, I think even just today, having another conversation about the fact that this is a practice that somebody could choose to take up is making it

percolate a little more in my brain to the point where hopefully, I will get to the point where, you know, I've grabbed a notebook, I've set it aside and said, This is my such and such notebook. I'm very excited about it. And I will use it in this way. And maybe start to try and incorporate this practice.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 52:42

And you could, or maybe you will in the future, but I just want to urge everyone to think through is there some not necessarily going that far to transcribe quotes into another notebook? But is it a matter of keeping a highlight a really pretty Erin Condren has a really pretty pack of highlighters that I really love, just having some highlighters near where you often read. Is it just a matter of deciding that marginalia is okay, and just kind of jotting down your thoughts, maybe that is the the step of interaction, or I have a couple of friends who simply do this through writing in post it and put in writing a note or maybe transcribing a quote, putting it on a post it on that page, and keeping it there. But then the book, if you wanted to, you could take all of that out, and the book would be completely fresh and new, and fresh and new. And so I just want to encourage everyone to think is there are a way for you to interact a little bit more with your books, then, where then what you are doing now, but that whatever it is, should be something that feels right to you, and it's not going to be the same for everyone.

Kaytee Cobb 53:51

Well, there's a huge community of readers that listen to this podcast, and we want to hear what you all do. Like maybe, maybe whatever you're doing is the perfect fit for me or some other listeners. So share it with us. Share, share, share, share, share, we want to know what you all are doing with this.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 54:08

Right send us an email currentlyreadingpodcast@gmail.com or if you're a patron subscriber and you're part of our bookish friends group on Facebook, post a picture there and show us your marked up books. Show us your notebook, your commonplace book, however you put this together. There's lots of digital ways that people do this. People have Trello boards, people have Pinterest boards, people have lots of different ways that they're keeping track of this. And so I think it's interesting. We talked a little bit about *A Swim in the Pond in the Rain*. That book I think is one that really lends itself to this practice of interacting with it. Would you agree Kaytee that just the act of marking up...

Meredith Monday Schwartz 54:09

He basically encourages you to do if I hadn't had a library book, because he says, "Take this sentence. Okay, now cross out what you think it doesn't need and what do you have left?" And and he encourages you to really get into it like our college professors did at the time. Right?

Meredith Monday Schwartz 55:06

Right. Right. So he's giving you that permission. So that might be a great way for someone who's like, well, "I just I don't want to do it in my fiction book that I'm just reading for pleasure. But I want to kind of do a little bit," that might be do a tandem read of that book and buy yourself a copy and then interact with it in that way that might get you over the hump. It's just something to consider.

Kaytee Cobb 55:25

Yeah, yeah, I like it. Although I will also mention the last book that I remember putting a lot of underlines, and marginalia in was *Breath* by James Nestor. And I wanted to listen to that one as I read it, because that is my favorite way to take in nonfiction. However, I think the audiobook was recorded at least some number of edits before the final copy of the book was published. So they didn't match completely. There would sometimes be an extra sentence. So I could not do that tandem reading, and it really bothered me, so I ended up just reading it and marking it that way. But it bummed me out that I couldn't do that. So you may encounter that sometimes readers.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 56:04

Right, exactly. That could happen. Okay, good. Well, I think that there are lots of different ideas that we've just talked about. I will be so interested to see if people are like, "You guys need to take a long walk off a short pier with this," or if people are like, "No, this is something I've been doing forever. Let me show you how." Very interested.

Kaytee Cobb 56:22

Definitely.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 56:23

Okay. Let's press some books into readers hands. What do you want to press for us Kaytee?

Kaytee Cobb 56:29

Alright, because this episode airs on January 31. That means tomorrow starts Black History Month here in the US, so I'm going to press this week *Clap When You Land* by Elizabeth Acevedo. This is a verse novel which has earned a place on my keeper shelves along with all the others I read by her and loved. Published in 2020, this is a quick read, but it packs a punch. Again, verse novel. It's a quick read, right? We have two main characters Camino and Yahaira. Camino lives in the Dominican Republic and is waiting for her father's arrival, which happens every summer he comes to visit for the summer. But this year she finds out his plane has crashed in New York City. Yeah, Yahaira is called to the principal's office where her mother's tells her, you guessed it, her father's plane has crashed on the way to the Dominican Republic. Just when these two girls seem like they've lost everything in the loss of their Papi, they learn about each other, and the truth of his love, which has been divided by an ocean. The blurb on this one tells us that Elizabeth Acevedo here writes about the devastation of loss, the difficulty of forgiveness, and the bittersweet bonds that shape our lives. Because none of us has a life that's perfect in every way, right? We all have to walk loss or forgiveness at some point if we're going to be in relationship with other humans. And this book may be YA, but even as an adult, these girls really touched my heart and made me hopeful and expanded my world a wee bit more. I love this book and mentioned in my review that it was the third of hers that I read and cemented that I will follow her anywhere. This one is *Clap When You Land* by Elizabeth Acevedo.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 58:00

Okay, the book that I want to press is one that I actually was so excited to be like, "I can't believe I have not pressed this book because it is one of my favorites." I absolutely love it. But I read it a really long

time ago and so I'd forgotten about it until I was at Barnes and Noble at the tail end of their hardcover book sale. And I saw this one and I was like, "Oh, I have to talk about this on the show because I love this book." I feel like we never see it anywhere. This is a book called The Flanders Panel by Arturo Perez-Reverte. Have you ever heard of this book Kaytee?

Kaytee Cobb 58:31

No.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 58:31

Have you ever heard of this author?

Kaytee Cobb 58:32

No.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 58:33

All right. He's very, very good. I really like his books. Alright, The Flanders Panel is set in Madrid, right in the middle of the teeming art world of that old city. Our main character is Julia, who has been commissioned to restore a painting by a Flemish master. It's a painting that's of two men playing chess with a woman reading in the background. But there's a small inscription in Latin beneath several layers of the paint. Julia realizes as she's restoring it that the inscription says "Who killed the knight?" It turns out that all the clues needed to answer that question and solve a 500 year old murder are contained within the painting. While attempting to find the solution, Julia and her friends find themselves stalked by a killer whose victims are all somehow linked by the painting. And ultimately, Julia has to figure out this mystery to survive. Oh, all right. If you're like me, sometimes you want a really good mystery, but one that does not include something horrible happening to a woman or a child. Right? Sometimes we just want that. That's the mood that I was in back in the early 2000s when I went looking for this book. The other thing that I had just done when I went looking for this book was I had just read The Da Vinci Code, and I was really very much in the mood for that art puzzle kind of vibe, right? The Flanders Panel is a gorgeous book. The writing is beautiful and sumptuous and the sense of place is nothing short of delicious. You will absolutely feel that you've been transported to the foggy cobblestone streets of Madrid. The mystery moves along, though, at the pace that I would call deliberate, not thriller speed here. But the art world details and the puzzle of the painting are so smart that your gears will be turning the whole way through. And I think what has stuck with me about this book is that is a smart literary mystery. And I'm wanting all of those kinds of books right now. If I come across a copy of this book, I'm going to buy it, and I'm going to reread it I'm so in the mood for this one. I do have to say, if you loved Shadow of the Wind, you need to grab this book. Now. It's the perfect kind of similar vibe. And it's a great time of year to read this book. Another bonus is that this novel is a novel in translation. Perez-Reverte is a Spanish author, who is excellent. So if you're needing that for a reading challenge, or just to expand your reading, this is a perfect solution. I highly recommend it. I just love this book. Again, I can't believe it's taken me this long to bring it to the show. This is The Flanders Panel by Arturo Perez-Reverte.

Kaytee Cobb 1:01:28

Interesting. That's such a, it's such a white name for a book in translation about Spain. And so I'm very intrigued by the title.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 1:01:41

But remember, the painting is done by a Flemish master. So it's not a Spanish painting. So it's very, very good and has a beautiful cover. That is it for this week. As reminder, here's where you can connect with us. You can find me on Meredith at @Meredith.reads on Instagram.

Kaytee Cobb 1:01:59

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

Meredith Monday Schwartz 1:02:02

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

Kaytee Cobb 1:02:13

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

Meredith Monday Schwartz 1:02:20

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Kaytee Cobb 1:02:40

Bookish friends are the best friends. Thanks for helping us grow and get closer to our goals.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 1:02:44

Alright, until next week, may your coffee be hot

Kaytee Cobb 1:02:47

and your book be unputdownable.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 1:02:49

Happy reading Kaytee.

Kaytee Cobb 1:02:50

Happy reading Meredith.