



Season 4, Episode 27: Happy Sighs + An On-Ramp to Romance

Mon, 2/14 • 48:17

Kaytee Cobb 00:10

Hi readers. Welcome to the Currently Reading podcast. We are bookish best friends who spend time every week talking about books that we've read recently. And as you know, we do not shy away from having strong opinions. So get ready.

Mary Heim 00:22

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

Kaytee Cobb 00:29

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

Mary Heim 00:39

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

Kaytee Cobb 00:44

I'm Kaytee Cobb, a homeschooling mom of four living in New Mexico and raising readers never gets old.

Mary Heim 00:49

And I'm Mary Heim, a working mom of one and let me tell you Kaytee, I didn't think I liked romance novels until I discovered rom-com novels. This is episode number 27 of season four and we are so glad you're here.

Kaytee Cobb 01:01

Mary I'm so glad that you love a rom-com because there's quite a few people out there that love them including myself and the rest of our team is not such a fan so you and I we get to bond over this.

Mary Heim 01:12

That's why, that's why we're here together today. I love it.

Kaytee Cobb 01:15

Exactly. Especially because as this episode airs, today is Valentine's Day. Happy Valentine's Day readers, no matter what your situation looks like. We love you, and we're here for you. Alright, so that cues everybody in our deep dive today is that we are going to do a romance on ramp. We're going to stay in the less steamy lane of romance but I'm excited to see what kind of recommendations we have there for either people who want to get started with it or people who are just like you know, I don't need all the details. Please keep the door closed.

Mary Heim 01:46

Yeah, just crack it open maybe just a little bit.

Kaytee Cobb 01:48

Just a tiny crack on that door. Mary let's get started the way we always do though, which is with our bookish moments of the week, what do you got for us,

Mary Heim 01:56

Kaytee, my bookish moment of the week is all about buddy reads, a great buddy read. Two of my favorite people in the world to buddy read with are my sister and my husband. And this past week, it just so converged that I got to buddy read with both of them. So I had had Piranesi on my list ever since Meredith absolutely, totally sold me on it. And my sister who was also a podcast listener had it on her radar as well. So we talked about picking it up together, and we were going to buddy read and work through it. I think it's a great book for a buddy read. After one day, not even one day of hearing me talk about what a wild mind bender this book was, my husband was convinced to grab it and read it alongside the both of us. So we all read Piranesi together. We flew through it in no time at all. It was really fun to get to share the "OMG WTF" vibes with both of them as they made it through this story. I of course, in kind of an unusually quiet work week, would like shut off my brain at the end of the day and just power through power right on ahead. So I got to hear their reactions as they were going through the story as well. We know that reading is made so much better with friends and this was like double whammy of awesome buddy reading for me this week. It was so much fun.

Kaytee Cobb 03:10

That is so fun. I buddy read that one too after Meredith talked me into it. So I guess we're starting a club at this point.

Mary Heim 03:17

Hashtag #Meredithmadeusdoit. I love it. Alright, totally happens all the time. All the time. What's your bookish moment this week?

Kaytee Cobb 03:24

Okay, for my bookish moment this week, I want to come around full circle on something I mentioned way back a few months ago. My third kiddo, Noah finished his reading lessons, which only means he's done learning the basics at this point. We use Teach Your Child to Read in 100 Easy Lessons. And it's been a really good fit for all three of my boys so far, which doesn't mean it's a perfect fit for everyone.

You do you. It's wonderful for us. Now that he's got those basics down though, I just add "read together" to his homeschool checklist every day. And that means we've been spending a lot of time with the early readers shelf at the library. He will haul like a 10 book stack and get through them in the week because every day he has to read me a book. So he's pounding through books like there's no tomorrow. It's so much fun for him to be so proud of finishing a whole book. "Mommy, I read a whole book." I'm like, "I know buddy. That's amazing." And just 10 to 15 minutes. And my of course heart melty, favorite parenting part is that he will pull Onalee over to the couch and he will read her a book. So he's getting that practice and she's being loved on by her older brother. It's just the best. supplication so joyful.

Mary Heim 04:32

I am a puddle. That is the sweetest thing I've ever heard. That sounds so magical. I like cannot wait, I can't wait for that day when we get to start to I mean it is still very far in the distance for me but reading with your kiddos seeing your kiddos read to you sounds like so much fun.

Kaytee Cobb 04:48

Yeah, I love that. It's really great. So I just wanted to close the loop on that. Nah is doing awesome. We're very proud of him. And now we're going to get into our current reads Mary so I hope you brought something juicy and fun to discuss. What's your first book you want to talk about this week?

Mary Heim 05:04

I am really excited about all three of my books this week. But the first one that I had to bring back that's right, you heard me correctly bring back is *The Sentence* by Louise Erdrich. So, you all may not be surprised to hear me bring this book because spoiler if you listen to me and I talk about our top 10 favorite books of 2021 in our minisode, you already know that this book topped the list as my favorite book of last year. But I just couldn't not talk about it on the main show since it was such a stunner for me. So in *The Sentence*, we meet our protagonist Tookie an Ojibwe woman who begins our story as a convicted felon in her early 20s, progressing all the way to current day 2020. In our current universe, where the pandemic is raging, where George Floyd has died in Minneapolis, where the story takes place, the backdrop of Tookie's story is a bookshop, a bookshop that is being haunted by their most annoying deceased customer. Throughout this tumultuous year Tookie must solve the mystery of this haunting, while at the same time trying to understand everything that is happening in Minneapolis during the year of grief, astonishment, isolation, and just this reckoning in the world. I think I've said it before, if this sounds a little bit all over the place to you, you wouldn't be wrong. The scope of this book is both vast and also really miniscule. The writing is really lyrical. But what I loved about this so much, Kaytee is that it I found it really accessible. I had kind of stayed away from Louise Erdrich in the past, because I didn't think it would be as accessible to me. But this book I would confidently give to anybody. It was very, very readable. It felt like kind of collective group therapy in this difficult year. Years that we've all lived as a society. I really thought I wasn't quite ready to read pandemic lit yet, but this book is so much more than that. What Erdrich really does so beautifully is I feel like she starts to make meaning of something that was and is so hard for practically everybody, everybody. And if I can pop my therapist hat on here for a second, that really is how we begin healing toward something difficult, right as making meaning. So I thought this book really did it so beautifully. And just from the first page wrapped me up in this story, these characters broke my heart, filled it all at once. I still think about it. It

has been months. That is how much it affected me. A fun little easter egg that I just have to drop in is that the bookshop in the story exists in real life. It's Erdrich's bookshop in Minneapolis. And she writes herself into the story as a character, which I just found really special. It was really cool. Another way that she imprints on this book and has a say in how you experience it is through the reading of the audiobook herself, which I found to be a really powerful way to consume it, to hear her read her own words. And I will say I may have struggled with finding my footing with this book a little bit early on if it hadn't been for her narration. But that really pulled it together for me. I really loved it. I don't think I'll ever read another Louise Erdrich book another way because that was such a powerful way to read and consume it for me. But ultimately, I just really loved how powerful and beautiful this book is. And it was so accessible, so readable. I just want to give it to everybody. I'm honestly shocked it's not my press this week. I loved it. That is *The Sentence* by Louise Erdrich.

Kaytee Cobb 08:33

Oh, I'm so glad that you brought it to the show and gave it what we call a full treatment because that's what we call it when we bring something as a current read rather than just mentioning it here and there on other segments. I'm very excited to pick this one up. As you know, I grabbed it for myself, I have it on audio and in paper. So it's a double read your shelves challenge at this point. So yeah, I'm really looking forward to this one.

Mary Heim 08:55

I can't wait. I am dying to hear your thoughts when you read it. You'll have to let me know.

Kaytee Cobb 08:59

Maybe I'll send you live messages and I'll let you into the reading experience.

Mary Heim 09:03

Yes, please.

Kaytee Cobb 09:05

My first book this week also has the author included in the story, but that's because it's memoir. It's *The Elephant Whisperer* by Lawrence Anthony. And if y'all are tired of hearing me talk about how much I love elephants, I'm not sorry. Too bad for you. You're going to have to listen one more time. This one was a direct to me recommendation from bookish friend Erica Keckley. Of note here, only one person recommended this book to me, so I picked it up right away. And especially with my love of elephants, it did not disappoint. Lawrence Anthony, the author, is a conservationist in South Africa, who heads up a reserve which mainly survives through funding from eco tourism. When he's asked to accept a herd of rogue elephants, a group of about 10 of them that continue to escape no matter what precautions are put in place, he knows that he's their last chance at a life. Thula Thula, his reserve, is desperately trying to get the enclosure ready when the herd breaks out again before they can be moved, and the matriarch and her baby are shot. That means that when he does receive this herd of elephants, they are not only escape artists, they are traumatized and trying to figure out their new social order. Lawrence has to bond with them in order to save their lives. Because if they escape again, the animals will be in grave danger from the townspeople and from local poachers. This is the story of forging that

bond. It is powerful, and sometimes difficult and often funny, and occasionally, very sad. These are real animals. And throughout this book, you can see how they become family to Lawrence, his crew and his wife. This book delighted me to no end even when it was difficult, and I'm so glad that Erica pressed it into my hands. I listened to it and with a great narrator, I truly adored it. But then I went to my local indie and found it on the shelf. And there are photos in the center section as well. So you can see the elephants that he's talking about. So that I mean, you got to take both of those things into account if you want to pick this one up and you decide which format you're going to use. I do want to make it clear that even from the beginning setup there, it's obvious that not every animal in this book gets a happy ending, because that's not how life is and that's not how animals work right. But each one is treated with care and dignity while in Lawrence's grace filled hands. I adored this book. It's The Elephant Whisperer by Lawrence Anthony.

Mary Heim 11:22

What a great listener press. I love that. That sounds perfect for you, Kaytee.

Kaytee Cobb 11:26

Yeah, Erica knew that I wanted to make sure that I'm not reading like only US authors this year. So she was like, "They're from South Africa. You definitely need this one. And it's about elephants," and it checked all my boxes. I loved it.

Mary Heim 11:39

Perfect. I love it. All right, Kaytee, my next book this week is a if I may say so perfect fit for the topic that we are digging into. I think it fits perfectly in that rom com category. And it is To Sir With Love by Lauren Layne. When I read the synopsis and saw that this one is an even more modern day retelling of You've Got Mail, I thought, "How can I not bring this to the show?" Which side note, that is the movie that tops the list of some of my all time favorites like so many of our listeners, I'm sure. So if you are in that camp with me, buckle up. Alright, here's the setup. We have Gracie Cooper, our protagonist. She has inherited the family champagne shop, her father's dream, the family business after his death. Try as she might to bring it into the 21st century, she's finding the profits really slim. The customers are dwindling and to make things worse, a giant corporation headed by the impossibly handsome but irritatingly arrogant Sebastian Andrews is gunning to buy out her lease and turn the space into a parking garage. Overwhelmed, not wanting to admit to her family and friends that she's having second thoughts about the shop, Gracie seeks some advice and solace from someone she's never met, the faceless "Sir", with whom she connected on a blind dating app where matches get to know each other through messages, common interests before exchanging real names or photos. Little does she know, she's met Sir before and they are not fans of each other Kaytee. I'm sure you can imagine where it progresses from there and you might know where this is going. Now listen, make no bones about it. This is absolutely a You've Got Mail retelling with some scenes in it that truly felt like they were plucked directly out of the film. But as you might know, You've Got Mail itself is a retelling so the air with which Lauren Layne really spun this story into something new and fun feels like a loving homage instead of a direct ripoff. It was cheesy. It was hopeful. It was lovely and fun. The characters were perfect. The chapters were short and unputdownable. It was as light and fizzy as champagne itself. It was a truly joyful read. Listeners might know that I have very specific tastes when it comes to rom com or romance. This one ticked all of my

boxes. It was so much fun. And in the author's note at the end, Lauren Layne herself does talk about how much she loves *You've Got Mail*. What a joy it was to kind of get to retell it in her own way. I thought it was just a delightful bow on the end of a really fun story. I will absolutely be taking into her backlist in the months to come. That is *To Sir With Love* by Lauren Layne.

Kaytee Cobb 14:16

That's fun. And I like that. I like that title too.

Mary Heim 14:19

Yeah, it was very fun.

Kaytee Cobb 14:20

Okay, my second book this week is *Dear White Peacemakers* by Osheta Moore, which actually also has a Minneapolis tie in so I'm harkening back to *The Sentence* here. Oh, friends, okay. When I finished this one, I hugged it to my chest, and that's saying something for any antiracism book, but Osheta is that kind of huggable in person too. I pressed Osheta's first book *Shalom Sistas* on episode 14 of season four. Now at that time, I had not yet picked this one up, which is her newer released. Now I have and of course I'm very glad about it. Osheta uses traditional Black hymns and the Christian tradition to guide her readers who she calls peacemakers through what antiracism looks like in the church and in community and in the world. She doesn't do it the way that many of us have become used to, by shaming white people for their whiteness, and all the history that comes with it. She approaches each of us, even those who have been hurtful toward her specifically in the past with an attitude of belovedness. As in when you have more to learn, you are still beloved. And that doesn't mean that she pretends to be a saint. In this book and these pages, she is honest about the times that she became so angry, she wanted to verbally spar and cause emotional pain and flip some tables. She's honest about what that feels like, and the emotional baggage that it leaves behind. When another person touches her hair without permission. She writes letters and these pages that occasionally brought me to my knees with emotion. She's vulnerable and powerful at a moment. Now Osheta is a pastor in Minneapolis, like I mentioned. Much like the James Baldwin quote, in which he says he loves America, and therefore reserves the right to criticize her. Oh, she loves the church, and is so much a part of it, she gets to reserve the right to criticize it. As someone who's been on the outside of the church, while still considering myself a Christian, I feel the same. I felt very like akin to her, even though I'm not serving in a church and I'm not leading a congregation of any way, shape or form. I am refreshed by her honesty that we find in these pages. And I read just one or two chapters a day so I could sit with it and mull over it each night. And that was a really great way for me to take it in. This book is going on my forever shelf. I absolutely loved it. It's *Dear White Peacemakers* by Osheta Moore.

Kaytee Cobb 14:21

Kaytee, this one has been on my shelf for the longest time and that was the bump I needed to pick it up immediately. I love it. It sounds like she did a beautiful job.

Kaytee Cobb 16:47

Well, and we got it's February. It's ready for you, Mary.

Mary Heim 16:50

It is here and waiting. I love it.

Kaytee Cobb 16:53

Perfect. What's your third book?

Mary Heim 16:54

All right, Kaytee. My third book for the week is A Psalm for the Wild Built by Becky Chambers.

Kaytee Cobb 17:00

I read this one last week.

Mary Heim 17:02

Oh, we did not plan that whatsoever. Now, okay, so we're all familiar with the concept of a cozy mystery, right? The Indie Press List too this year even brought us cozy horror with Cackle. But never before had I ever read a cozy sci-fi novel. But here I am today bringing you this one in the form of A Psalm for the Wild Built. In this slim, quick little novel we are catapulted into this pseudo distant future where the robots of our world have gained self awareness, laid down their tools and wandered in mass into the wilderness to experience the natural world instead. It has been centuries since they've last been seen, faded now into myth and legend. We meet one of our characters Dev, a tea monk, which in this world is someone who set out to serve humanity in their traveling wagons, providing tea, love that and a listening ear towards anyone who needs someone to talk to. Dev crosses paths with a robot Mosscap, who is fulfilling the robots promise to check in with humanity every once in a while and ask, what do people need? Dev and Mosscap traveled together, talking about the world trying to see it through each other's eyes and finding the humanity between them. This book is quiet and lovely. It is familiar and also wildly alien. It was the last book that I read in 2021 and provided the exact kind of quiet soulful contemplation that I really needed as I closed out the year. It is a book to pick up if you're finding yourself a little caught up, maybe struggling with the world's constant need to do, to give, to produce, and to just be reminded of what's at the core of who we are. This was my first Becky Chambers novel but it certainly will not be my last. That was A Psalm for the Wild Built by Becky Chambers.

Kaytee Cobb 18:47

Well and it's called Monk Robot number one, so your monk and robot number one. So I know we're going to get more of this one. I loved it too.

Mary Heim 18:54

So I mean really like unlike much of what else is out there. If you're looking for something that feels really fresh, I think that this one perfectly fits perfectly fits that bill. I too am very excited Kaytee to see what's to come in this series. I love it.

Kaytee Cobb 19:10

There's a scene in this little novella, sharing a meal around a campfire that I cannot stop thinking about. It's been like I said it was last week, maybe two or three weeks ago and all the time I'm like, "I wonder what monk and robot are doing now. I wonder if they're sharing a meal again together." I just loved that scene so much.

Mary Heim 19:30

No I know exactly what you're talking about. That was a great scene. I love that. And can we just say like maybe I will quit my job and just become a tea monk. Like, that feels perfect for me. That sounds like a great career. How can I have that? I love that plan.

Kaytee Cobb 19:44

I love that plan. Mary Heim, tea monk. Alright, You can keep @Maryreadsandsips. You could be on Bookstagram

Mary Heim 19:51

I mean, that is where the sips comes from. I love it. Alright, let's hear about your third.

Kaytee Cobb 19:58

Okay, so now we're gonna go to my rom com this week, which is *If the Shoe Fits* by Julie Murphy. And I had to put it here because it pairs so perfectly with our deep dive today. This is the first in a new series being published by Disney's Hyperion publishing line. The series is called "Meant to Be" and each book will be written by a different author, and basically be a retelling of a classic fairy tale. But the Disney version right there's not like people like throwing up blood ever. In this one, we have Julie Murphy, who wrote a previously pressed book of mine *Dumplin*. Julie is retelling *Cinderella* in a delightful Bachelor knockoff fairy tale with a plus sized heroine at its core. Cindy is our main character. Cindy, right because it's *Cinderella*, and she just graduated from college with a degree in shoe design because of course she did. That's a thing. As she tries to sort out her post college plans, her stepmother is floundering around to try and find a starlet to fill a spot on the show that she produces. It's a reality show called *Before Midnight*. This is a very, very thinly veiled reference to *The Bachelor* in which multiple women compete for one man's heart. Cindy volunteers for the spot, even though she knows that she will face backlash in you know, the publishing industry or the world because of her size, right? So she and her two stepsisters, both all three decided to fill these empty spots because as any watcher of the actual show knows, the big get is not the dude, it's the social media exposure, which may jumpstart her career. Side note here, all of her step family is super lovely and delightful and there's no terrible family relationships here like her stepsisters are not trying to undermine her every return. Her stepmother is never mean to her. It's lovely. The family is great. As it turns out, being the only plus size woman on a show, or the only plus size woman to ever be on this show is big news. And Cindy steals the social media spotlight, especially as she gets closer and closer to the finale. And all of America starts rooting for her. This is romance, but it's the Disney version, so anything even remotely spicy happens off the page. The next one in the series is called *By the Book*, and it's a retelling of *Beauty and the Beast*, and it's written by Jasmine Guillory. It's currently slated to come out in May of this year. And y'all I could not press pre order fast enough on those. I'm so excited about that one as well. I'll be

grabbing it as soon as possible. This one I have already told multiple people to pick it up. They've all loved it because it's delightful. If the Shoe Fits by Julie Murphy.

Mary Heim 22:25

I love that. Give me all of this series like contemporary beloved novelists rewriting Disney stories into rom coms. Gimme I love it. So great.

Kaytee Cobb 22:45

It's so fun and like, you know, it's like it has the One to Watch vibes to it also right which we loved. Kate Stayman-London. But but this one has that like frothy Disneyness to it, which I really appreciate it.

Mary Heim 23:00

Love that. What a great way to transition us into our deep dive Kaytee.

Kaytee Cobb 23:04

Yes, we are ready for our romance on ramp. So these are all Mindy approved. And if there's any spiciness to them, we will of course mention it. But yeah, we wanted to talk a little bit about the milder side of romance and maybe getting started with it getting your feet wet, if you will, in the rom-com, romantic comedy, contemporary romance genre, especially because I knew Mary was the perfect person to talk about this with so Mary, get us started here. What do you want to tell us?

Mary Heim 23:35

All right, well Kaytee, let me say this. So I think like many people maybe thought for the longest time that romance novels are just the Harlequin romance novels that I used to see in the library as a kid and think like, What the heck is that? Only that they were only bodice rippers that they were only you know, the only characters in them were named Fabio. To my delight, as I as my reading has progressed, I have really learned that that is not necessarily the case and my on ramp was really with rom-coms. I love a rom-com movie. Obviously, you've got mail as a favorite movie of mine. So transitioning from you know, a rom-com film to a rom com book was like not too big of a jump for me. So that's really kind of where I dipped my toe in and I've got some categories today things get a little bit spicier. I did bring a few slightly steamier options if you are well on to the on ramp and you feel like speeding up you're right, you're speeding up got exactly Yep. But a lot of these, most of what I brought today, really is for dipping your toe in, the fade to black scenes, squeaky clean. You just need some joy and some love and some happiness and a story that ends with good feelings and good vibes and good things happen to people and that I think is something that a lot of us are looking for in our books lately of wanting to escape some of the difficulties of the world and find joy and lightness in our reading. And I think that that is what romance and rom-com and YA romance can do for you is bring some of that joy. So I'm really excited to talk about some of those today.

Kaytee Cobb 25:14

Okay, so what's your first category? Because I'm guessing you have a broad swath of reads and I can kind of slot mine in wherever you have space for them.

Mary Heim 25:22

Perfect. Okay, my first category is we're just barely getting on to the onramp friends with some squeaky clean and/or YA romance, which are not always mutually exclusive, of course, but this is the case today. So this is our squeaky clean, there is no nary, but maybe a case in the in these stories, and it's really just mostly about like the love that builds kind of the infatuation, the happiness, what have you. So my first that I absolutely had to start with, instead of talking about specific books, I'm going to talk about an author who I think does this really well, Katherine Center. So you may be familiar with Katherine Center. Her books have gotten really popular in recent years. She just writes such lovely love stories with a rom-com bent, that she's got these characters that you grow to love, writing that is really immersive and fun, well paced plots, really hopeful outcomes. I love all of her books, but some of my favorites are Happiness for Beginners, How to Walk Away, Things You Save in a Fire. I think that those are some of her three strongest novels. You could pick any one of them up for this delightful little escape into a lovely, a lovely reality. She doesn't necessarily have heroines who are like fresh faced 21 year olds. It's not necessarily like older heroines, but she's got a little bit more of reality and a little bit of life in her characters, which I find really appealing as well. So I love Katherine Center. I think you can't go wrong starting with her.

Kaytee Cobb 26:54

There's also a lot of really lovely YA fantasy that has a love story element to it like one of our favorite series, A Curse So Dark and Lonely by Brigid Kemmerer. Very tame, absolutely can hand it to your 15 year old if you want to. Same with Cinder by Marissa Meyer. There's some love story in there, but it's not the central part of that story. So that's even more like that's like you're sitting at the stop sign. maybe thinking about turning onto the on ramp, you know. Yeah, we're gonna keep this highway metaphor going. Yeah.

Mary Heim 27:26

I love that and Kaytee kind of bouncing off of your YA, these aren't necessarily YA fantasy, but some YA contemporary romance that I love, Fat Chance Charlie Vega, which we have talked to I've talked about the book before. I really loved it. Coming of age, body positive, diverse love story. That one is really, really fun. I would hand that to any teenager and above looking for an adorable, totally closed door romance. When Dimple Met Rishi, another YA that is a favorite of mine. We've got two Indian teens matched in an arranged marriage who both gets sent to the same summer program for aspiring web developers. Love that little kind of STEM focus. We've got total romantic male protagonist, and our female protagonist could not want anything less to do with this marriage and we see their story come together. So delightful, totally closed door. Really, really fun. Another pick that I just want to truly push and press into all of our bookish friends' hands is To All the Boys I've Loved Before by Jenny Han. Could not be more perfect, maybe one of my top five favorite YA series of all times, of all time. If you haven't read or seen the Netflix series, you might not know that it's as much about the nostalgia of your crushes, accidentally finding out your love letters to them which like the 13 year old inside of all of us is internally cringing at that but I think it is maybe the best representation of a trio of sisters that I have ever read reminded me a lot of my family. Experience this one. Grab all three of the books at once. You're gonna want to read them back to back to back, so fun totally squeaky clean. I love it.

Kaytee Cobb 29:02

All right I've also got A Pho Love Story by Loan Le and Tweet Cute by Emma Lord which throws back to your You've Got Mail reference here with To Sir With Love because that is a totally You've Got Mail adjacent romance, competing burger joints. That is what we have as our protagonists where they're working and where they're trying to like, you know, make their own way in the world. It's super cute. And then you know, I don't even know if this should really count but I also wrote that there's cancer kid loves stories which never get, you know, open door at all. So that stuff like The Fault in Our Stars, Five Feet Apart. You may have to close your eyes, but that's probably because you'll be crying not because they did anything that you would not hand to your 15 year old. So there's a lot of angst and teenagers in these books because that's what teenagerhood is angst and falling in love for many of us, right?

Mary Heim 29:58

Yes. And Kaytee just to kind of close off my recs in this category, talking about both angst and also You've Got Mail too. I also really loved, a little angsty, The Summer of Jordi Perez. This really sweet and lovely queer YA romance that also has really strong body positivity vibes total perfect summery beach read and yet another You've Got Mail callback, Tell Me Three Things by Julie Buxbaum love. Two teens connect anonymously over the internet and become confidants and friends and things blossom from there. That's another really fun one. If you love those You've Got Mail vibes.

Kaytee Cobb 30:36

Perfect. I love that. All right, what's your next category here that we can play around in?

Mary Heim 30:41

Okay, so category number two is doors cracked open a teeny tiny bit and we should say again, if you're not familiar with this metaphor, open door right is you're seeing, you're hearing, you are mentally you might be in the room with everything that's happening. Closed door you're not seeing or hearing about any of it. So this category is doors cracked open a teeny tiny bit, there's maybe some tension some fade to black moments. We don't really see too much but just a little bit. The first one that I have to plug is a beloved series of mine, the Veronica Speedwell series by Deanna Raybourn. This like historical adventure romance. It is a go to comfort series for me. There's some slow burn tension building romance over the books, nothing really explicit. It is by far not the main plot point of the stories, though I do think the character's romance is one of the main selling points for why it's so beloved. But there's a lot else going on in the story and a lot of tension and will they, won't they and it's just a really fun fun fun read. I love that one.

Kaytee Cobb 31:45

This is also where you could put a lot of the Sophie Kinsella books. She writes that kind of Pitch Perfect, barely cracking the door open romance and the one that I just talked about, If the Shoe Fits. You've got like kissing all the way to the bedroom and then sneaking back out afterwards and nothing in between and that's exactly what closed door is or slightly cracked open door.

Mary Heim 32:07

Yeah. I also had Sophie Kinsella on there. I think that's perfect. My book this week one of my current reads this week To Siri with Love would totally fit into this category. I think another author who so many of her kind of romance or rom com adjacent novels would fit in this category Rainbow Rowell. We've got the Attachments and Landline, Fangirl which would maybe belong in YA squeaky but still would kind of fit in with some of her other backlist. It's totally like there's a romance happening but that's kind of all you hear about it. Another one I think really fits well in this category, a little divisive perhaps, but Emily Henry The People We Meet on Vacation and Beach Read kind of quintessential rom-com with a little something more to them. The Flatshare, Kaytee I don't know if we've talked about this one on the book but kind of piggybacking off of Emily Henry. We've got two strangers in an unusual circumstance they end up sharing an apartment but they never actually meet. They connect to via notes in their apartment. It's a love story of course, but also has some more emotional heft to it. That makes it a little bit resonant and again just barely cracked open that door.

Kaytee Cobb 33:16

Beach Read definitely has at least one spicy scene that I remember pretty well against a bookshelf that I adored.

Mary Heim 33:25

Okay, thank you for reminding me. I was wondering if I was gonna forget some details. So maybe we'll set that one aside to put in our next category.

Kaytee Cobb 33:34

Okay, I will add to this category though. Ayesha At Last night by Uzma Jalaluddin, which is fantastic Pride and Prejudice retelling with some additional throwback to classic literature and as far as classic retellings go Katherine Reay writes of wonderful series of books that usually have some elements of Jane Austen in them including some of the banter and romantic situations without it ever becoming about sexy time. So she's a great author to pick up for that one too.

Mary Heim 34:04

I love that and Kaytee, I'm going to finish off this category with some of my beloved Taylor Jenkins Reid, not so much necessarily her newer novels, though some of them would fit into that category, particularly Evelyn Hugo. But some of her earlier stories, One True Loves, After I Do. If you're looking into her backlist, those are two of my favorites. Really interesting and unusual situations, really readable characters and romance for sure. But by and large it is not the primary point to the story.

Kaytee Cobb 34:33

Perfect. Alright, so now we are like sufficiently on to the on ramp and we're speeding up. What's your next category Mary?

Mary Heim 34:40

All right, category number three, Kaytee is whoops that door is open. And that's exactly what I wrote down but I will say but what kind of keeps this category away from our final category is that the story

doesn't revolve only around the steamy scenes. You can skip them. You can flip over them and still enjoy the story. You're not really going to be missing much. So that is for someone who maybe is not necessarily super into the steamy scenes but wouldn't mind reading some of the stories behind them because I think some of these are really well done. So that is this current category. I am going to start by with absolutely two books that have made my favorites of this year and last year, Casey McQuiston's queer romance novels Red, White and Royal Blue and One Last Stop. I'm sure no one is unfamiliar with them at this point, but just in case you are Red, White and Royal Blue, we've got a royal meets the son of a female president and their relationship goes from hate to love. One Last Stop is a time travel New York City romance with found family. Both of them are steamy for sure. But I do think you can read these stories and skip over those scenes and you would be okay. You would not miss out a ton of plot from the story and you can still really enjoy them. And I'll throw one more into this kind of sub category. Nope, I lied, two more into this subcategory of kind of steamy, open door queer romances that have a lot more story to them also. Boyfriend Material by Alexis Hall, this fake boyfriend trope with excellent banter. And The Charm Offensive by Alison Cochrun, we've got a star on this Bachelor esque reality show falls in love with his producer and that one in particular has great mental health representation. So another reason to read the story beyond just the steamy scenes, if that's not necessarily for you.

Kaytee Cobb 36:34

I love that. I did not pull together a list of getting further onto the ramp. So we're just gonna let Mary keep going with this because I've got lots of books here, but these are all for Mary at this point.

Mary Heim 36:48

I love it. Alright, so Kaytee out. I'll keep rolling with another two that have found their way onto my favorites lists. Diana Biller's Widow of Rose House and Brightest Star in Paris. Both of these are historical romance with really incredible characters. Really propulsive kind of nerdy, slightly ghostly stories, all while the tension builds in one or two steamy scenes the cap at the end of the story. So you can flip over them, finish the story and still get a really great novel in or you know, if you don't want to flip over the pages and you want to fully enjoy the scenes, go for it. They're really fun and well done. And one that has got a lot of chatter in the fall was The Ex Hex, witchy Hocus Pocus-y romance with of course, some supernatural elements. Got a lot of buzz, wasn't universally loved. I however, loved it for spooky romance, which is not two categories that often overlap. Not at all. Another two series or authors I think do this really well... The Bromance Book Club series, a group of guys bond over reading romance novels together to improve their marriages. I love this one too, because it's about romance that happens after the wedding, right, not just leading up to it. And Jasmine Guillory who we already talked about. Her books are diverse and steamy, escapist romance with varied life situations and ages across all of her characters. Any one of her books would be a great pick in this category. She's so much fun.

Kaytee Cobb 38:19

So far, the least steamy that I've read of hers is Royal Holiday, which also has an older protagonist, which I love about that one as well. So she's a widow. She's a divorcee. But she's older and finding love after you're 50 is still possible, and lovely.

Mary Heim 38:35

And important. Yeah. Love it. So that's the end of that category for me, Kaytee.

Kaytee Cobb 38:40

All right. I love it. I love it. I love that Jasmine Guillory's in that one too. So yeah, can't wait to see where we're going with our final like speed up to the fast lane.

Mary Heim 38:49

Alright, so I will say in this category, which I have titled "toot toot this was steamy."

Kaytee Cobb 38:57

I'm gonna have you title all segments from here on out.

Mary Heim 38:59

Here we go. That is my talk about a career shift, right? But we're thinking full on, full steam ahead toot toot. Here we come the only book that I put in this category and really, I probably could have shifted some from my previous category into here because certainly there is some steam in some of those books that we previously had mentioned. But I chose this book because as the book is laid out, there is no way to skip the steamy scenes and still really read this book. That book that I'm talking about is Erotic Stories for Punjabi Widows. So this one got a lot of buzz in recent years, and I think rightfully so. We've got a young woman who takes a job teaching kind of a creative writing class to a group of Sikh widows, that ends up morphing into this kind of sexual liberation, community, sisterhood awakening. The stories that these widows right they kind of flex their creative writing muscles through writing erotic stories, but it is so much more than that within the story. It is really great, if a bit spicy on audio, but for sure just the way that it's laid out, it would be difficult to skip over scene after scene after scene of the stories that they're reading and writing. But if you're down for it, it's a really great book that also has a lot more heft to it than one might expect from a story with a title like that. I loved it. But that's the only one I put in this category. Because I don't read much of necessarily that toot toot steam train, here we come where there's not anything where there's not much else other than kind of the steamy scenes happening in the book. So that's the only one I put in this category, Kaytee.

Kaytee Cobb 40:42

I like it, I would say one of my favorite romance authors is Chloe Liese, and she writes romance that is really about tension. So there's so much of the book dedicated to tension. You're not diving into the bedroom in 20% of the way into the book. But then by the time you get to those final scenes where that tension finally resolves, if you know what I'm saying, you can't skip it. It's the whole resolution of the book. So I would say her books would fall into this category and that they are, you know, like fan your shirt a little bit when you're reading scenes at the end. But it's also the culmination of everything else that has happened in the story so far. So you absolutely cannot just skip the final, you know, 30 pages of the book and say, "Okay, well, I'm sure that was a lovely ending. Too bad for me." So that I definitely would add her to that final toot toot scene for you. That was so fun. Mary,

Mary Heim 41:45

That was really fun. You know, as we were going, I was like, I don't read that much romance. I'm not sure if I'm going to be able to fill out this deep dive. Was I ever shocked. Because I really do feel like this is something that has changed in my reading over the last five, six years or so that just goes to show you can continually be evolving as a reader. You can scoff as I did, wrongfully so at a whole category of books for a long time and then learn and pick some great books up and shift and change your mind. And that's exactly what happened for me. And I think that it's a really fun, it's a really fun piece of the puzzle to have in your reading arsenal. Because sometimes you just need something that's lovely and and that's what romance and rom-com reading can do.

Kaytee Cobb 42:29

I agree. I think if you went back into my reading journals 8-10 years ago, you would find zero romance titles in those journals. And last year, I read maybe 25 romances, so it's certainly not something that I sneeze off anymore. I keep those in my back pocket to deploy when necessary. Okay, so let's press some books into our listeners hands this week. Mary, what do you want to press?

Mary Heim 42:55

All right, Kaytee, this one is a total divergence from our deep dive this week, but I have just been sitting on it and wanting to bring it to the press list for so long. So now is the time. That book is Kitchens of the Great Midwest by J. Ryan Stradal. Now, I know that this isn't the first time this author or even his works have been on the podcast. But I truly was shocked to find this book not yet on the press list because it is an all time favorite for me. Kitchens tells the story of Eva Thorvald from her birth on, told under the guise of food. We begin this story by seeing Eva's father's love for her. This eccentric chef who speaks his love to his infant daughter through pureeing pork shoulder for her first foods right? The story continues on to tell you his journey all through the perspectives of those who come in and out of her life at varying points in time, coupled with an ingredient that tells a story all its own, from Scandinavian lutefisk to hydroponic chocolate habaneros. I mean, really, if you are a foodie, or if you love reading foodie books, put this one high high at the top of your list. The format of this novel is a little unusual, you have to make it through the first few chapters to at least see how it's going to play out. It is simultaneously a foodie novel that also tells the story of how food can really make a person, can create community, can create a sense of identity. We don't really get to know Eva through her own story, but we hear from those around her and that makes it all the more fascinating to dig into. I loved this one on audio enough so that I'd maybe count it as one of my favorite audio books of all time. And maybe it's just because I'm Midwestern but reading it felt like coming home. If for some reason this backlist gem has eluded your TBR polies please bump it up. This story is like little else I've ever read and it is totally worth a spot on the press list I think. That is Kitchens of the Great Midwest by J Ryan Stradal.

Kaytee Cobb 44:52

I love that and I loved it. There's a minisode where I got to talk to J. Ryan and so definitely recommend picking up his books and then going and listening to that minisode, because he's a delightful human. And I did also love this book, especially the way that Eva loves spiciness. That's my favorite because it's so like countercultural for her.

Mary Heim 45:11

Yeah, totally. Yeah. Not necessarily super Midwestern about her, but I love that. Yeah.

Kaytee Cobb 45:16

so fun. Okay, I have some spiciness for the press list. Today, I am going to press *The Secret Lives of Church Ladies* by Deesha Philyaw. This is the only book that I read twice in 2021. And maybe the only book I've ever read twice in a single year, ever in my life. It has its own like special place of honor in my heart. This collection of short stories is one of my favorites I've ever read. So nice I read it twice. The story *How to Make Love to a Physicist* is fantastically and expertly written. *Snow Day* gives us a whole relationship through just the glimpse of a few moments. There are stories in here that made me tear up, and ones that made me laugh out loud. They say that hard writing makes for easy reading. And none of these stories is difficult to work through or discuss. They each have little shining nuggets inside them. They're easy to uncover, but you still feel like you found a treasure. It wasn't gotten easily even though you can see it right there. While we may have just talked about the less steamy side of romance, this one would absolutely go in the category three to category four scenes. Because there are some stories here that have opened door sex scenes that may turn away some readers. There's also relatively frequent mention of adultery and use of it in some of these plots. So all that to say I'm putting this on the press list. It's not going to be a fit for every reader. That's okay. That's not what the press list is. The press list is books that we've loved that we want to press into your hands. This tiny book packs so many punches. And I do as always insist that you read these stories, the quote unquote, "right way" at only one a day, preferably discussing with friends. No more than that. This one is *The Secret Lives of Church Ladies* by Deesha Philyaw.

Kaytee Cobb 45:20

I love that. Kaytee, if twice in the same year isn't the perfect like impetus for putting it on the press list, I don't know what is, right?

Kaytee Cobb 47:10

I mean, what else? What else can you ask for there? All right, that is it for this week. As a reminder, here's where you can connect with us. You can find me Kaytee at @notesonbookmarks on Instagram, and Meredith is at @Meredith.reads.

Mary Heim 47:21

And you can find me Mary at @Maryreadsandsips and Instagram.

Kaytee Cobb 47:25

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.

Mary Heim 47:34

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

Kaytee Cobb 47:42

And if you really want to help us, become a bookish friend, it's only \$5 a month you get so much great bookish content and community. Rate and review us on Apple podcasts or shout us out on social media. All those make a huge difference in our being able to find our perfect audience.

Mary Heim 47:57

Bookish friends are the best friends ever. Thank you so much for helping us grow and get closer to our goals.

Kaytee Cobb 48:03

Until next week. May your coffee be hot and your book be unputdownable. Happy reading Mary.

Mary Heim 48:09

Happy reading Kaytee.