



Season 4, Episode 40: So Many Murder Books + Disaster Books

Mon, 5/23 5:33PM • 51:57

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 strong opinions, so get ready.

Kaytee Cobb 00:23

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

Meredith Monday Schwartz 00:33

I'm Meredith Monday Schwartz, a mom of four and full time co living in Austin, Texas and finding great new indie bookstores makes me endlessly happy.

Kaytee Cobb 00:43

And I'm Kaytee Cobb, a homeschooling mom of four living in New Mexico a I am both a book nerd and a theater nerd. This is episode number 40 of season four. And we are so glad you're here.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 00:55

All right. We are glad to be here Kaytee. I'm very happy to be talking books.

Kaytee Cobb 01:00

So glad. Let's address your your sexy phone sex operator voice here Meredith.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 01:05

Is it really bad? Can you really hear?

Kaytee Cobb 01:07

No, it's just deep and sexy. What's going on with you?

Meredith Monday Schwartz 01:10

Well, so last week when we recorded I was on the downslope. I was good. I was good. I had just that morning, come down with symptoms. And I felt my body sliding into what is what was going to become a really, really bad flu. Johnny had it. Jackson had it. And then I was the third to get it. It's a terrible flu. It's been seven days of just the grossest gross. And I've had to reschedule things and put off things and rejigger things. And I hate doing that.

Kaytee Cobb 01:43

Well, we're glad that you're here and that you're feeling well enough that you're back behind the mic again.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 01:49

Yes. And I do feel well enough to be back behind the mic, and I'm excited to talk about books. I'm hoping that my voice will cooperate. That's really the only unknown right now.

Kaytee Cobb 01:58

We're going to be totally fine. Everything's gonna be fine. I'm gonna be like the mantra of today. So I'm gonna let everybody know right here at the top of the show, before we dive in, that our deep dive this episode is disaster books. And that's getting a little close to home with the way that your home has gone this past week. But we're going to talk bigger disasters in that floods, fires, earthquakes, and just kind of put things in perspective. But first, we will get started the way we always do, which is with our bookish moments of the week. Did you have anything bookish this week, Meredith?

Meredith Monday Schwartz 02:29

Well, what I was going to talk about this week was I was going to talk about the fact that two weeks ago, when it was independent bookstore day, I got a chance to go to Novel Memphis. And I had this wonderful, wonderful time going to Novel Memphis. And that's what I was going to talk about today. But then I realized that really my bookish moment from this whole past week, not only has been feeling like microwaved bird poop, but also feeling so frustrated when my body gets to a place where I can't settle down to read. And I just realize that there are times that this happens. But this particular thing makes me so cranky, because I think I have this idea that, well, if I'm going to be sick, at the very least, I could get a lot of reading done. Right? Or a lot of audiobook listening. My brain would not cooperate with me, I read one book in the past nine days, which you know, for us, kaytee is not a lot at all. Right? And so, you know, that was really, really frustrating to me, but I would just try to pick up a book, I was wandering around like a drunk Noam, like picking up books and putting them down again, and being like, Oh, I can't even remember liking to read. I can't even remember the feeling of being able to be like "That book sounds good. Let me read it for 45 minutes and really get into it." So I'm just really hoping that that returns to me really soon. Because right now it feels like that's a distant memory.

Kaytee Cobb 04:02

It'll come back. As we know, there are seasons to our reading. And sometimes there are little micro shifts like Mary and I talked about recently, and we go through it. I do want to focus really quick on the drunk gnome, because I kind of want one to just wander around my house and make crude comments all day. I think that'd be amazing.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 04:21

Yeah, you don't want a drunk sick gnome. Let me let me at least say that maybe maybe like a good natured drunk gnome would be fun. Right? Yeah, this has not been fun for anybody.

Kaytee Cobb 04:34

I'm sorry. Okay, my bookish moment this week, is that tonight, I finally get to see after three full years of waiting, *Come From Away*, the Broadway musical based on the same events as *The Day the World Came to Town* by Jim Defede, which I brought to the show on episode 14 of season four, and to my top 10 books of 2021. We bought tickets to this show in May of 2019, for the 2019 season that went into 2020. So of course, then there was a pandemic Lovato and that got rescheduled to 2021. And then there was a panini, and it kept getting rescheduled. And now finally, in May of 2022, I finally get to see this show, which is based on a book about something I have been so loving learning about reading about the best of us. And I'm very excited to go and cry my eyes out and finally get this like, cathartic bookish joy on the stage tonight.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 05:37

I hope it's wonderful. I have heard such good things about it. And yes, certainly don't wear a lot of eye makeup, because it sounds like you're gonna be doing a lot of crying. But I've heard it's incredibly well done.

Kaytee Cobb 05:47

I'm so excited. I cannot wait. And I cannot believe that it's been this long having to get to this point. So many years later, so I'm very excited. Let's talk about some current reads. Meredith, what have you been reading lately?

Meredith Monday Schwartz 06:03

All right. Not in this last week, but pretty recent anyway, the first book I want to talk about is a book that I absolutely loved so much. This is *The Appeal* by Janice Hallett. Now Kaytee, did you read *The Appeal*? Have you read it yet?

Kaytee Cobb 06:19

No. But I've been seeing it everywhere. And it looks so fun.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 06:23

Fun is the right word. So this book is unlike anything else that I have read. It's construction is masterful. Let me tell you a little bit about this setup. So the first thing that I have to tell you is that the very British title of this book, *The Appeal*, has probably thrown you for a loop as it did me. I thought we were going into something having to do with maybe a legal appeal. That's not what this is Kaytee. So instead, what we have is we come to know *The Fairway Players*. They're a local theatre group, who are preparing for their next play, when tragedy strikes the family of the director, Martin Hayward and his wife, Helen, because they're and Helen, by the way, is the star of the play of all the plays that they do. So their young granddaughter has been diagnosed with a rare form of cancer, and they need to raise money, a huge sum of money for an experimental treatment. And they're castmates amongst the *Fairway Players* rally to raise the money to give poor Poppy a chance for survival. But not everybody is convinced of the experimental treatments efficacy, nor of the good intentions of those involved. And soon there's a dead body and an arrest is made. This all serves as the setup for the construction of this ingenious book, because in the run up to the trial, two young lawyers are tasked with sifting through tons of material, emails, messages, letters, texts, with a growing suspicion that the killer may be hiding in plain sight. The evidence is all there between the lines waiting to be uncovered. And we are right there with these

two young lawyers trying to find the answers right alongside them. Oh my gosh, this book is so so interesting. Kaytee it is an absolute romp. If you're in the right mood, okay, so you have you have to be in the right mood for this. I'm going to it's epistolary. But I mean, in name only, this is a I mean, basically what this is like, is like opening up the hunt a killer boxes that that I love to get. It has nothing to do, the author has nothing to do with them. But the experience is like the kind of novel version of that game, where you are reading these emails to and from the different players within the theater group, and friends and spouses and all and you are trying to figure out what really, really happened. It is so fascinating. It is so much fun. It absolutely scratch that itch that sometime I get when you can sort of like look in people's drawer, you know what I mean? Like or you're privy to a conversation, you're privy to a conversation that you're not, you know, you're not supposed to be hearing or in this case, you're reading emails, and you know, you're not supposed to be you know, that nobody ever thought that these emails were gonna get out. This is just that fun, puzzle solving kind of adventure. And I was so excited all the way through. Now a couple things I will definitely tell you, for sure. You do not want to do this book on audio people. You need to do this book in print, it would be a massive mistake to do it on audio, because you are going to need to flip back and forth to go back to certain things. Who said what, didn't they mention this, who was that email from, you're going to want to go back. You're also going to want to read this book with a highlighter, and a note, and a pen, and some flags and some posts to take notes, because that's really, really a fun way to read it. And you're probably going to want to mark out a few hours of time because once you get started on this. You are not going to want to stop. The blurb on the front of this book says that is a dazzling, clever modern Agatha Christie. And I agree, but I'm going to take it one step further and I'm going to tell you that I actually think that if Dame Agatha Christie was still alive and with us today, this book would be her favorite book of the year. This is *The Appeal* by Janice Hallett and I adored it.

Kaytee Cobb 11:00

Okay, I have to chime in that I literally knew nothing about this book, except for the fact that the British cover is the way to go. So we have to shout out Blackwell's here too, right?

Meredith Monday Schwartz 11:11

Yes, if you are going to buy it, you might as well go to Blackwells and take a gander at that cover versus the American cover. Because it is fantastic. I mean, the American cover is not bad. It's perfectly fine. But the but the British cover definitely is a step better. But either way, you're absolutely if you like a puzzle solving mystery. If you like Anthony Horowitz for example, you're certainly if you like Agatha Christie, you're really, really gonna like this book, but it's a very modern take on the kind of closed room mystery.

Kaytee Cobb 11:43

Okay, so my first book this week, I feel like would be a good primer for anyone trying to solve *The Appeal*. So I'm going to talk about *Stiff: the Curious Science of Human Cadavers* by Mary Roach. This gross and fascinating book was first published in 2003. So nearly 20 years old, and it's Mary Roach's debut. She has now made a huge name for herself writing about science in a hilarious tongue in cheek way. And this book about dead bodies is no exception. I was laughing out loud, and also completely disgusted by turns. A few weeks back, I brought *How High We Go in the Dark* to the podcast. When I led the bookish friends in a buddy read discussion about that book, a number of readers mentioned this

one as an interesting companion read, or where I learned stuff about dead bodies book and about half of us had never really read it. And we were like, wait, what? Hold on. So there was some there was some coercion that happened. And though that half of the group all joined a big buddy read, sweet bookish friend Francis has taken to calling me a book dominatrix because of those kinds of situations where I'm like, "Come on, just get in with us. You know, you want to buddy read with us." And I'm now putting that on my resume. So during the discussion, we all borrowed Stiff, and we made a new chat and we agreed to read one chapter a day and discuss and then we dive in. And boy, oh boy, did we get our feet wet. But not with anything lovely, like spa water. No, we got to get our feet wet with bodily fluids and mortician, mortician, embalming supplies, and the science of crucifixion and what kind of things are released when you do that situation. For me, the chapter that most disgusted me was the one about cannibalism, which had to be included because it's something that happens to dead bodies. But the number of times we use the cry laugh emoji about the phrases she used and the examples is probably at least tenfold what you might expect for a book about dead bodies. So while I was plenty grossed out on the regular. I also would put this book firmly onto my humor shelf and will certainly pick up more Mary Roach in the future. My long suffering husband got to relive his medical school days and answer many questions about his anatomy lab, especially as we read because cadavers as you know, figure prominently in learning for physicians. If you're curious, his cohort named their cadaver Maj because that was what they came up with for the first initials of each of their names. Maj was loved and respected by all four of them, conveniently or not. We then started working on some estate planning stuff and I had all kinds of ridiculous tidbits to share with him about what can happen to your body after you die, which is awesome. And thankfully, I had read Stiff: the Curious Science of Human Cadavers by Mary Roach to enliven those discussions.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 14:39

Excellent. This is the kind of book that makes you a really good cocktail party guest.

Kaytee Cobb 14:44

Oh, yeah. I cannot wait to be around people I don't know. Yes.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 14:47

And just talk about decomposition. All the live long day you'll be the most popular girl in the group.

Kaytee Cobb 14:52

It'll be disgusting.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 14:54

All right. I will tell you that when I go to cocktail parties, which is never and it's probably because of this, I love to talk about serial killer books or true crime books. And that's because I read books like this next one I'm going to tell you about and that is Small Sacrifices by Ann Rule. So you guys know that I love The Stranger Beside Me. I mean, who you know, loves true crime doesn't love The Stranger Beside Me. It's a classic in the genre to be sure. So I have long wanted to read more by Ann Rule. The setup on this one is pretty straightforward. So on the evening of May 19, 1983, Diane Downs arrived at McKenzie Willamette hospital, driving a blood splattered Nissan. Inside the car were her three children, her eight year old seven year old daughters and then her three year old son. They were in critical

condition lying in the backseat suffering from fresh gunshot wounds. Diane Downs herself had been shot in the arm and immediately told authorities that a bushy haired stranger flagged her down on the side of a nearby deserted road and proceeded to shoot her three children, and then herself. She claimed she barely managed to get into the car and drive off, leaving the two men behind. Two of the Downs children were expected to make a full recovery, while her oldest daughter passed away shortly after arriving at the hospital. But her strange and cold reaction to this news was what immediately made investigators think something was not right. As the investigation deepens, Diane's version of the story gets more and more convoluted. And the detectives become more and more sure that something very bad happened on that road. And it did not involve bushy haired strangers. All right. So this is very interesting premise, right? I love a story that takes place in the early 80s, all sorts of forensic goodness there, and not a cell phone to be found. That always makes things more interesting, right? So I picked this book up only knowing about *The Stranger Beside Me*. I bought it at Half Price Books, which has become my go to for true crime. It was published in 1987, which I mentioned, because that was seven years after *The Stranger Beside Me* was published. And this book feels like it was written by an author who had had a very big best seller, and was given free rein just to go on as long as she wanted. It's very well written and meticulously researched to be sure. And I will definitely say that Ann Rule knows how to tell a story. She brings you into the minds of the killer, the victims and the detectives. But there were so many times that I just felt she was going down unnecessary rabbit holes. Did I need to know the info about a detectives wife's dad? I am serious. That's the level of rabbit hole that we were going down. It was just too much. It constantly took me out of the narrative. I do like that Rule takes us into the mind not only of the killer, but of the detectives and the DEA who investigated and took Diane Downs to trial. She keeps everything very even handed that way. The killer and the victims and law enforcement get equal time on the page. Well, except that was a major criticism of *The Stranger Beside Me* is that people said that she was some people said that she was too even handed with Ted Bundy. This book hits all the high spots for true crime, the crime what led up to it the why of this inexplicable crime, the trial, almost word for word, and then the afterward. So there's no question that after finishing *Small Sacrifices*, I feel that I know exactly what happened on that May Day in 1983. And maybe that was her sole aim. For my money, I would have edited the book down by about 30%. And I think it would have been pretty close to perfect. So I continue on my search for the perfect true crime novel akin to *The Stranger Beside Me*, or *The Yoga Store*, *Murderer* or *I'll Be Gone in the Dark*. This unfortunately, isn't it but it's still a good one. It's *Small Sacrifices* by Anne Rule.

Kaytee Cobb 19:02

Okay, so my second book this week, is one that I received from my ya shelf subscription from bookshelf Thomasville has a gorgeous cover. Very excited to read it. And then I let it sit on my shelf for a solid year and a half. Because that's what I do. Yeah, so this is *Woven in Moonlight* by Isabel Ibanez. Ximena is our main character. She is the decoy Condesa or Countess for the kingdom of Inkasisa. This kingdom thrives in the moonlight, so their motto is "Carpe Noctem" or seize the night. However, the Countess and therefore Ximena is in danger. Their walled city doesn't have the supplies it needs and they cannot venture out because a usurper has taken over the main city last year. Atoc is the name of the usurper, and he demands the hand of the contessa in marriage in order to reunite the city and the castle. Both sides will benefit as La Ciudad is lacking water and the Wild Kingdom is lacking food. Of course, Ximena as the decoy has to go in her place and resolves to either kill Atoc, or find the Estrella, which is an ancient relic that commands an unstoppable Army of the Dead, which gives Atoc his power.

That's how he was able to take over. Well, inside the keep of La Ciudad, leading up to this hopeful marriage, Ximena uses his her moon given powers to weave threads of moonlight into tapestry in order to sneak messages out of the city. She also starts to pick apart the tapestry of xenophobia, and the hierarchical power structures that she had never even been able to see. From her closed off place of privilege. She's been raised in a palace, treated like a countess, she never realized where the real conflict was between these two people. As the wedding day draws nearer, she has to decide if she wants to help the Condesa's mission, or if there's a better way to serve the entire kingdom and its inhabitants. This book is YA, but it's really strongly interlaced with themes of colonialism, the war on drugs, poverty, and profit, and racial hierarchies. For the first half, I really didn't like it very much at all. Ximena doesn't see her own privilege, her own blindness. And yet you're seeing this story through her eyes. And I didn't like being in her head. I felt like she had a lot of learning and growing up to do. I wanted to shake her and say, "Don't you see that you're on the wrong side of this?" Of course, Atoc, the villain here is horrendous. And you love to hate him. So basically, it's complicated. There's no one likable for the solid first half of the story. As she starts to make connections and form relationships inside La Ciudad and starts to see and learn for herself what has been outside of her walled off life. Ximena becomes more of a heroine and less of a pushover. But it takes a long time to get there and I almost abandoned the book. It definitely ends with a setup for another story in this world. But since I had to push myself hard enough to get there, I probably will not pick up book two, which was published in 2021. The lush imagery of Bolivia, where both of our author's parents were born, and the strong South American cultural elements are what carried me through. That's the only reason I stuck with this book. As you can probably tell, I also loved how much Spanish was sprinkled throughout. I felt like I was back in my master's program, getting to read all kinds of great cultural literature from a South American country. And I also really loved the elements of moonlight that are worked into the story. This is YA fantasy, but I'm hopeful that this author continues to grow from this debut into a stronger writer overall, because this one was not a win for me. It's Woven in Moonlight by Isabel Ibanez.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 22:47

Oh, that sucks. Because it does have such a beautiful cover. And the premise is really good.

Kaytee Cobb 22:52

Yes, it is. But those are the characters. I mean, especially for her way. Hey, you gotta have somebody that you enjoy to be around. Right. So yeah, absolutely. Okay, what's your third book? Meredith?

Meredith Monday Schwartz 23:05

I know I've been very very murderful today in my in my choices. So in this case, we're gonna go sci fi murderful.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 23:05

Not something that we do a lot. But several people had mentioned that we don't bring a lot of sci fi to the show. True, true enough, but I actually really liked sci fi. So I sort of used that as a challenge to say, I'm gonna make a point of picking up more of that in the future. I'm really happy with some of the ones that I have. This one I really really liked. It's called The Gone World by Tom Sweterlitch. Here's our setup. Our lead character is Shannon Moss, who is part of a very classified division within the Naval Criminal Investigation service. Yes, that's NCIS in western Pennsylvania. In 1997, she is assigned to

solve the murder of a Navy SEAL's family and to locate his teenage daughter who's gone missing. Though she can't share the information with conventional law enforcement, Moss discovers that the missing navy seal, the dad of the family, was an astronaut aboard the spaceship USS Libra, a ship that was assumed to have been lost to the currents of deep time. Moss knows firsthand the mental trauma of time travel, and believes that the seal's experience with the future has triggered this violence. Determined to find the missing girl. Moss travels ahead in time to explore possible versions of the future seeking evidence to crack the present day case. Now at this point, the marketing blurb goes off even further into a bunch of things which in blurb form will only serve serve to confuse the reader. But in the book, all of this makes perfect sense. So I will just say that you can know that this book is best described as a murder mystery with a serious side of Terminator. I'm so glad I picked this up because this was recommended by Holly from she's at @BirdBrainbooks. And she also is the co host of the Hearts and Daggers podcast, which I love. And she had recommended it to me a year ago. And I had gotten it from a library, done it as a part of a book flight and didn't end up reading it. And I remember the exact moment as I was starting this book, this time that I sat it down last May. And this time, the same part that made me want to set it down a year ago, was super interesting to me, which very much speaks to why we do book flights. And why I am so committed to NRN or not right now, because this book was literally not perfect for me a year ago and perfect for me, really recently. So this time, it was such a hit. It was exactly what I was looking for. So this is time travel and mystery, there is no question that you have to pay very close attention in this book, especially as you get to the halfway point. This is not a book that you can take to the pool, and read in fits and starts between your kids coming up to you and needing snacks. And you know all of that you need some time and attention to read this book. So definitely know that. Also, it should be noted that there are several really gory scenes in this book, trigger warnings for all kinds of death and decomposition. So definitely take this warning very seriously. Well, you definitely do have to pay attention because things move fast. And the time travel stuff is confusing at times in a terminator kind of way. Some of the scenes from the future are truly amazing with tech that I really hope exists someday, because it would be so so cool. So this book is a trip and a half. It's mind bending and complex and absolutely worth your time. Especially if you really like Blake Crouch's writing, especially Dark Matter. It's a true genre jumper and I'm so glad that I read it. This is The Gone World by Tom Sweterlitsch.

Kaytee Cobb 23:12

Oh, perfect.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 23:48

Interesting. You know, I love a comparison to Blake Crouch. So

Meredith Monday Schwartz 27:04

yeah, this one was like an even smarter Blake Crouch. I mean this.

Kaytee Cobb 27:09

Now that almost scares me.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 27:11

It was really really, really interesting. And I loved the main character Shannon Moss. I really liked her a lot.

Kaytee Cobb 27:17

Nice. All right. Okay, so now by my count with my sixth, my third book, which is our sixth book overall, we're like five or six on murder or gross or deadly books this week because I want to talk about The Golden Couple by Greer Hendricks and Sarah Pekkanen.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 27:35

Yes, I have stayed away from this one. Kaytee, I can't wait to find out what you thought.

Kaytee Cobb 27:39

All right. Well, this is the next book from the writing duo that brought us An Anonymous Girl, The Wife Between Us and You Are Not Alone. And I realized that these two are one of a few authors that I have read every book that they've put out. Even though every single one I've given either three or four stars, there have been zero like amazing hits out of the park for me with Greer and Sarah. I don't care. It doesn't matter. Something about this type of thriller really pulls me in and I can't stay away even though I don't always end up loving it. Remember way back when we talked about the venus flytrap books Meredith? That's exactly what these are for me. I'm like, but it's Greer Hendricks and Sarah Pekkanen. I have to read it. I want it. I don't. It's not gonna be great for me. It's okay. I still want it. In The Golden Couple, we're following two storylines. The first one is Avery. She was a licensed therapist, but then she lost her license for unconventional practices. That's fine, because now she's jettisoned the title of professional and continues to practice her unorthodox 10 step methods on people in crisis, and it works, which is why she has a great clientele. That's why she's contacted by Marissa and Matthew Bishop, because they are desperate to see if they can save their marriage after Marissa discloses an affair. But that's not all that's hiding under their perfect veneer, their otherwise perfect veneer. And Avery has to peel back the layers to figure out what's really going on. And maybe just maybe she'll end up in danger herself as she gets closer to the truth. This book is one that Libra FM sent me as an advanced listening copy. And I devoured it in a single day. I couldn't stop listening. I had to know how it turned out. And by the end, I had a pretty good feeling about what was going to happen. And I turned out to be right. And that was good enough for me. It was basically mindless fodder on a Saturday perfect for exactly what I needed. Will I be able to tell you the plot a year from now? Maybe the bare bones? How about the other books I've read by them? Nope. Just the bare bones. I have a very basic idea about what happened in each of them. And that's okay. Not every book is a forever book. And these two authors have been a reliable, bookish booty call for me for years. And I'm keeping their number in my little black book, because I like knowing they're there for me. It's The Golden Couple by Greer Hendricks and Sarah Pekkanen.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 29:55

I'm so glad that that was good for you and I don't think that, at least for me, the mark of a really good book is not necessarily that I'm going to be able to remember all of the plot points. Because I honestly think probably with most books, like Nerf gun to my head, I'm not sure I can tell you a lot about I'm not

sure I retain that information really well, I think some people do, but I don't, but if it was enjoyable all the way through, and you didn't feel icky, or bored, that's a huge win

Kaytee Cobb 30:31

Yeah, I agree. I mean, obviously, as I did the setup here, you can tell there's adultery in here. And there are some things that some of us don't want to fit, don't really want to touch in our thrillers and mysteries. But for me, it was exactly what it needed to be. Excellent. Okay. All right. Well, those were our six books with a lot of murder on the side, you could find there. And so now we're gonna talk about disasters, which are murder adjacent, we would say.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 30:57

It's a real optimistic episode that we're bringing to everyone today.

Kaytee Cobb 31:01

We are full of fun, obviously, as always. I do want to say, at the top here, or ask Meredith, why, why do we like to read about disasters? What's appealing about the disaster fiction genre?

Meredith Monday Schwartz 31:15

I mean, I think, for me, the biggest draw is thinking, Well, there's two parts of it. It's a desire, kind of part of the reason why I like true crime too, a desire to know what actually happened. And then I think there's also the desire to think through what would I have done if I had been in that situation?

Kaytee Cobb 31:36

Yes, I completely agree with you. I want to know A. what it was like to be in that situation, and B. would I have made it? I mean, it's like the it's like the zombie thing, where it's like, are you going to be the one that somebody takes with you on your on the zombie apocalypse? Are you the one that they leave in the back so the zombies eat them first? Right? I want to know.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 31:56

Right. And there's an element also of maybe if I read this book, I will learn something that in some future situation will be useful to me. Right? It's mostly ridiculous, but it's still the hope is there.

Kaytee Cobb 32:09

The hope is, and so I don't know about you, Meredith, but I found a lot of books about a lot of different types of disasters. I was not able to go deep on any one type of disaster like fire versus flood versus earthquake versus pandemic. The only one that there's a lot of our pandemic books. I feel like those are everywhere.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 32:29

Right. Well, I will tell you, there's one particular disaster that I realized from putting together my notes for this episode, that I have read a ridiculous number of books about,

Kaytee Cobb 32:39

Okay, should we start there? Or is that like a capstone?

Meredith Monday Schwartz 32:43

Yeah, no. So we can start there. So I realized that I, well, I've not I realized I've always known since I was child, that I have been super fascinated by the the circumstances around the Donner party back in the 1800s. And you guys know, this is the real life story of a group of people who went from the east traveling to the west over the Sierra Nevada Mountains, they took a wrong turn. They didn't listen to some good advice. They ended up in the snow, and people ended up eating each other. Now, since I was a kid, we grew up I grew up in the Truckee Donner area, in part and so that's exactly where it happened. So we would go to the museum, we would go to the actual place where they summited and my dad and I just really got into this. I read the first book that I that was on my list Ordeal by Hunger by George Stewart, when I was like eight years old. My dad, we went to the Donner party Museum, and I saw as we were leaving that there was this big chunky mass market paperback, and I was like, Wait, is that a book about and my dad bought it for me and I spent the entire rest of my summer vacation, reading that book. And so then as an adult, I reread that book. We just two three years ago, we went back to Donner and we went to the museum again, I reread the book and then I read Alma Katsu's The Hunger, which is the fiction version of the story of the Donner party with a horror element. It's fantastic. I really, really, really loved that one. And then I dipped in and out of two other works of fiction that are basically about the Donner party and they were just very like, like Little House on the Prairie ish kind of versions of it. Yeah, it was like, it's just not not my speed, but I am. So that particular disaster, I've done a lot of reading around for 40 years of my life.

Kaytee Cobb 34:39

Interesting. Okay, so do you feel like it's the entire combination? Or this is something off the cuff here? Or is it the snowstorm element because I know you have some blizzard books in your trough of disasters as well?

Meredith Monday Schwartz 34:54

I do. And I do think that there's an element of the snowstorm partly because I didn't grow up around a lot of snow. We went to Donner a lot, but it was always over the summer. So we weren't dealing with snow. And so I didn't, you know, I grew up in the Central Valley of California. So snow was not a part of my growing up. And I'm, I think I'm kind of fascinated with being snowed in. I have a lot of anxiety around the idea of being snowed in or driving in the snow or not being able to get supplies. So yes, snowstorms, in particular, are ones that are very fascinating to me, you would think, given where I grew up, and where I live for so long that it would be earthquake stories, but I actually don't have a lot of that in my reading. But have you read a lot of earthquake stories?

Kaytee Cobb 35:37

Well, I have, I have one earthquake story in my back pocket here. And it's sci fi fantasy. It's The Fifth Season by NK Jemison, which has this other world building, but everything is based around rocks and geology. And there's a lot of earth moving. In that story. The one that I have on my TBR, which probably will feel too close to home for you, Meredith is The Nature of Fragile Things by Susan Meissner, which is about the San Francisco earthquake,

Meredith Monday Schwartz 36:03

Susan Meissner really loves those big dramatic disasters as central points because as I started thinking about this deep dive, there was also one that Mindy brought from her which is called Fall of Marigolds, which is about the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire. And then one that I really loved and pressed was As Bright as Heaven by Susan Meissner, which is about the Spanish flu and kind of the fallout for a family that works in the mortician type situation. So all of those have kind of a very central disaster element to them, right?

Meredith Monday Schwartz 36:03

Right, the earthquake of 1906, which of course, the earthquake itself was not the problem. It was the fire afterwards. That was the problem. And I actually have read that book, and it's quite good. I know it's one that Elizabeth Barnhill really, really loves and recommends for if you love historical fiction. That's when you're definitely going to want to try. Her works are a little more emotional in that way I don't, I feel like they're trying to make me feel emotion. So for that reason, it's not it wasn't a gigantic hit for me. And also, it took a really long time to get to the events surrounding the earthquake and the fire, which was kind of what I thought we were going to be getting from the beginning, but it does do a good job of covering that era and what happened before and after and it weaves in some interesting stories within it too.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 37:21

Which makes a lot of sense when you're writing historical fiction, right? You don't have to make up a premise. You have that big inciting event that then you can build a story around. I think it makes a lot of sense. But to go back to the issue of blizzards, one of my favorite so two of my favorite disaster books, one is nonfiction. One is fiction. And the nonfiction also a recommendation from Elizabeth Barnhill, who if you really love disaster books, she we really should have had her on for this discussion, because this is really her oeuvre. This is she loves herself some disaster books. The Children's Blizzard by David Laskin is one that she pressed into my hands the very first time that I went to Fabled and that I met her and I came home and just ripped through that book that's about the storm that comes in so quickly. They call it the children's blizzard because kids were literally walking home from their little one room school yard just on a perfectly normal day. And this blizzard came in so quickly that these children died, like on route home, like the like died in place. And so that's a really interesting story that gets into the history of meteorology and how we study and predict weather. That's a very, very interesting disaster book. That's nonfiction. But the book that haunts my dreams is a book called We Are Unprepared by Meg Little Reilly. And that is fiction about a superstorm that is like the storm of all storms that is present day that we know is coming. So we have like days and days, weeks and weeks of knowledge that the storm is coming. And some people believe it's really going to happen. And some people are like super prepared, and some people don't prepare at all because they think that oh, this is just a bunch of hullabaloo. It's about this small group of people and what happens after the storm actually hits? That's a great one. If you like imagining what would I do in the face of impending and then right after a disaster if you like thinking, you know, what would my reaction be? That's a great sort of psychological study of how humans react to disaster.

Kaytee Cobb 39:24

Yeah, but the flip side of a snowstorm is lots of non frozen water right so I actually have a few flood books on my list, one of which is *After the Flood* by Cassandra Montag, which is very like everything is covered in water. Almost everything takes place aboard a ship and society has vastly changed because the the earth is now flooded, right? Icebergs have melted, etc. There's a lot of similar themes in *Migrations* by Charlotte McConaghy. And we just talked about a book for the indie press list that has a city that's been buried underwater because of a dam situation that one is called *Seven Years of Darkness* by You-Jiang Jiang. And each of those I love that like, excessive amount of water element. I think that's something that really terrifies me. The idea of like, not being able to see land in any direction, it brings up a lot of really scared emotions. But I love reading that kind of stuff. Because I'm like, Okay, this is these are the ways that life would change. You'd be eating, you know, fish all the time. And how do you protect yourself from the sun and all that kind of difference in thinking because we're so used to living on land, that it would just be a completely different worlds. So I love books like that, even though they really freak me out.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 40:39

Well, absolutely. And another post flood book that I think about all the time is *Five Days at Memorial* by Sheri Fink, which covers the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. And it is nonfiction, incredibly well written, reads like, you know, just the most propulsive thriller. But, you know, these horrible things happen to really real people, and really hard decisions had to be made. It's another example of where we think about Hurricane Katrina, the storm, but it wasn't really the storm, that was a problem. It was the flooding that happened afterwards, that caused most of the death and destruction that took place. So that's *Five Days at Memorial*. And that was very, very interesting,

Kaytee Cobb 41:22

The fictional version of that one that I'd like to bring is *Salvage the Bones* by Jessamyn Ward, which is a Black family living in New Orleans, post Katrina, or during Katrina, you feel like you're in the house with them, as the winds are lashing outside. It's very difficult to read. So the point that I have friends that live in Louisiana and New Orleans area, and I've told them, this, this might not be the book for you, because it will feel so intense to you that that it might not be you know, digestible, because it'll be too much. So that one, oh, my gosh, and like the dogs and like having to work through that thought process of how do we keep everyone in the house safe, the grandma who is wheelchair bound, versus the pets that can't, you know, escape to anywhere or whatever it like, it's just Oh,

Meredith Monday Schwartz 42:10

Scary. Well, in the category of things that hit close to home, the book that I most recently read, is a book that's called *Paradise, One Town's Struggle to Survive an American Wildfire* by Lizzie Johnson. This is the story of the deadly, deadly fire that took place in a town called Paradise, which is not very far at all, from where I lived in Northern California. We certainly didn't live through that fire in any way, shape, or form, except that the smoke from those fires covered the entire Bay Area for weeks and weeks. And we lived in this very strange, orange world that we had never lived in before. And our schools closed the because the the the air quality was so bad that schools closed for multiple days. And of course, that's really tangential to the fact that what happened in the town of Paradise was so in just incredibly scary, and this book is incredibly well researched, and really puts you right in the thick of

things, right? You can feel the heat of the flames. And it's really hard to read, it's really, really hard to read, because this book just gets right up close to what happened. And there were so many people who died, who just did not have they were literally everything was fine until there were flames that their backs, and an entire town was destroyed. And it was just, that was a really, really scary time. And I can't imagine what these people went through. So the book is one that I would say is a great example of a well written disaster book, but man that trigger warnings abound in that book, if you were, you know, involved in any way, shape or form with that,

Kaytee Cobb 43:51

Right. For for me right now, we have about 25 miles in one direction a 260,000 acre wildfire that we're keeping track of and making sure that people know that are closer to it that our house is available to them. And then about 40 miles on the other direction, another 60 to 80,000 acre wildfire that it feels like we're surrounded no matter which way this the wind is blowing on any given day. We're getting hit with the smoke. And so a wildfire book to me right now feels like the hurricane book for my friends in New Orleans. Like I can't. That's too close. It's too close. Yeah, exactly. All right. So I did want to point out my one tornado book. Okay, is the Wizard of Oz by L. Frank Baum. There you go. I feel like I want to I want a little lightness in here. Let's go with Dorothy over the rainbow and have a little bit of fun with the The Lion, the Scarecrow and the Tin Man.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 44:47

How can you think it's light when the Wicked Witch of the West was killed? I mean,

Kaytee Cobb 44:51

I love the wicked witch.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 44:52

I love her and she was killed and then everyone's skipping down the golden

Kaytee Cobb 44:56

Oh, too much empathy yellow brick road Yeah, yeah. Okay, well then how about the other side of lightness which that one goes in quotes, which is "nature strikes back" disasters, which mostly you've brought to the show Meredith. I'm talking Into the Drowning Deep. I'm talking Devolution.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 45:14

Oh, yes. That was one I almost included on the list.

Kaytee Cobb 45:19

Yeah. Yeah, I mean, tapeworm. That's probably nature strikes back basically science strikes back maybe, but definitely disasters that, thankfully are very far from our own experiences, no matter where you live.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 45:33

Right. Parasite, that's the tapeworm one, Mira Grant. If you if you like "nature strikes back" books, which is not disaster books, but if that's what you like, Mira Grant is your author to check out. She does that really well. For sure.

Kaytee Cobb 45:47

Okay, that was plenty of disasters. I feel like we need to knock on wood at this point. Because there's a large situation that we just dealt with here. But let's move on to books that we want to press into readers hands. You don't have another disaster for us do you?

Meredith Monday Schwartz 46:01

I do not. In fact, as I was preparing for the show this morning, I was like, Okay, I need a palate cleanser because I have just been full of murderful books and then disaster books. So Kaytee, what where do I go whenever I need that kind of palate cleanser. I always had to my cozy shelf and I realized and I think kaytee you'll be surprised by this because we've talked about this book so many times. We have never pressed The Secret Book and Scone Society by Ellery Adams.

Kaytee Cobb 46:30

That's terrible!

Meredith Monday Schwartz 46:31

Right because you and I both love this book. We both love this series. We both love Ellery so we need to add it to our list. So you guys will remember this I'll just do a very quick setup. Our setting is Miracle Springs, which is a town that is known far and wide for its being a place of healing. Tourists come there hoping to really benefit from the natural hot springs, their five star cuisine, and their renowned spa that supposedly can cure many ills. And they often find their way to Miracle Books, where over a fresh baked comfort scone from the gingerbread house bakery nearby, they exchange their stories with owner Nora Pennington, in return for a carefully chosen book. So Nora has a very special talent. When she meets you, she automatically senses what books she needs to press in your hands. So a visiting businessman reaches out to Nora for this kind of guidance, and she knows exactly which novels will help. But before he can keep their appointment at Miracle Books, he is found dead on the train tracks. And you know, Nora, and the rest of the Secret Book and Scone society are going to help solve this case. Kaytee, this book is just pure comfort and charm and delight. It's bookish, because of course we're in the bookstore. It's got a lot of fantastic female friendship with different kinds of characters coming together and being found family. It's got books as medicine. It's got all the it's got the hot policeman in town. It's got the bakery, right, and all the special, almost magical goodness that happens there. And it's just really, really, really good. So if you need to clear your system of all that murder, and all that disaster, pick up The Secret Book and Scone Society by Ellery Adams. And this is a book that Kaytee you and I have both read deep into the series. And I don't think there's a loser in the bunch. They're all really really good. I love this cozy series.

Kaytee Cobb 46:39

Yes, I will cosign that wholeheartedly, and be aghast with you that we had never pressed it before because it needed to be on that list. Yes. Okay, my book that I want to press this week, I just finished

my first week of testing that I've ever done on my two older homeschool kiddos. It's about what they know. Yes, but it's also about what I've been teaching so it was like test week for me. Also, I was probably more anxious than they were SPOILER ALERT they did great and homeschool is definitely working for them. And for us. Suffice to say as I sat at administer test this week's I had quite a bit of time for self reflection as well. What's working for me as a parent or as a homeschool mom? What isn't? What would I like to excel in? What would I like my percentiles to be in my parenting right? And what can I lay down and that train of thought got me on to one of my favorite five star parenting books, which is How to Be a Happier Parent by KJ Dell'antonia. I read this one in January of 2019 and it earned a permanent place on my shelves at the time. And in the spirit of the lazy genius, it also allows me to essentialize my shelves by unloading other parenting books that had similar information in them and keep just this one that had all those points in one volume. Even the blurb totally speaks my language in that it says that KJ discovers that it's possible to do more by doing less and if that's not my life motto then I don't know what is. Find me the most effective and efficient way of doing things so I can set down the scramble and I will be happier Kaytee. Each chapter tackles one problem spot in parenting and then gives us tools and techniques to improve that single area like getting out of the house on time, or getting kids to do chores and homework, or getting them to eat what you put in front of them. Of course, the lessons are broadly applicable, and really do touch on the stuff that real parents face. Not stuff like how to make the perfect bento style lunchbox. Gretchen Rubin reminds us often that the days are long, but the years are short and sometimes that phrase hits me so hard in the feels, like it did this week when I said it to my husband with tears in my eyes. I want to look back on this time with joy, and I want to love my family well, and this book is one of my favorite resources for that. It's How to Be a Happier Parent by KJ Dell'antonia.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 50:38

Well, I love that. That is all of our goals is to be not just a good parent, but a happy parent while we're doing it. Yes. All right. That is it for this week. As a reminder, here's where you can connect with us. You can find me I'm Meredith at @Meredith.reads on Instagram.

Kaytee Cobb 50:53

And you can find me Kaytee at @notesonbookmarks on Instagram

Meredith Monday Schwartz 50:57

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 in our website at currentlyreadingpodcast.com.

Kaytee Cobb 51:07

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Meredith Monday Schwartz 51:14

And if you love this content and want more of it, you can become a bookish friend, which is the patron supporter of currently reading. It's only \$5 a month and you get a lot more of talking books with me and Kaytee. You can also rate and review us on Apple podcasts or shout us out on social media. Each one of those things make a huge difference in us finding our perfect audience.

Kaytee Cobb 51:34

Yes, bookish friends are the best friends. Thank you all so much for helping us grow and get closer to our goals.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 51:40

All right, until next week, may your coffee be hot

Kaytee Cobb 51:43

and your book be unputdownable.

Meredith Monday Schwartz 51:44

Happy reading Kaytee.

Kaytee Cobb 51:46

Happy reading Meredith