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[00:00:09] **Kendra** Hello, I'm Kendra Winchester, here is Sumaiyya Naseem. And this is Reading Women, a podcast inviting you to reclaim half the bookshelf by discussing books written by or about women. And this is episode eighty-five, where we're talking about books around this month's theme, Marriage Stories.

[00:00:27] **Sumaiyya** You can find a complete transcript and a list of all the books mentioned today linked in our show notes. And don't forget to subscribe so you don't miss a single episode.

[00:00:37] **Kendra** So we are recording this in the middle of March, so we are coming to you from what is hopefully peak social distancing time.

[00:00:46] **Sumaiyya** Yeah.

[00:00:46] **Kendra** It's been a week. Let me tell you.

[00:00:50] **Sumaiyya** Yes. And you know what, Kendra? I feel like I have been preparing for this moment my entire life as an introvert. This is our moment.

[00:01:00] **Kendra** It really is. I mean, we love to discuss how we get our groceries and food delivered all the time.

[00:01:07] **Sumaiyya** Yeah. Both of us do that.

[00:01:09] **Kendra** Yes.

[00:01:11] **Sumaiyya** We order everything online already. So I feel like I didn't even have to transition into this. I'm already there.

[00:01:19] **Kendra** I definitely didn't. I definitely didn't. As someone who works from home, we record this in two different locations. So we're not even together while recording this. So, I mean, we are prepared. So we don't really have a lot of news for you because most things have been put on hold or suspended during this time. We hope all of you are staying safe in your homes and that by the time you're listening to this, the worst has passed.

[00:01:46] **Sumaiyya** Yeah. I mean, it's been a difficult week for a lot of people, especially authors because, you know, so many book tours have been canceled. I mean, all of the book tours have been canceled. And that's really tough, especially for the debut authors.

[00:02:02] **Kendra** Yes. Yes. I have been feeling so badly for them. My heart goes out to them. So if you would like to share, dear listener, if you would like to share a book that you're very excited about, that maybe the author's book tour got canceled. Definitely tag us in your stories. You can tag us (@thereadingwomen), and we will be happy to repost those and hopefully spread the word a bit more. Also support your indie bookstores. A lot of them are really getting hit hard because it's hard when you can't keep your doors open to sell books and pay the rent and pay, you know, all your bills that are coming in. So.

[00:02:40] **Sumaiyya** Yeah, and another way to support authors whose books may be coming out in April is you can preorder their books, and that really helps them. I've also

seen people create threads on Twitter where they are linking all of the books that are coming out this month, especially the books that they care about, and really boosting that on social media, which is an amazing help for all these authors and publishers as well.

[00:03:06] **Kendra** So if you don't have a local indie bookstore—I know a lot of places don't; where I grew up still doesn't have an indie bookstore—you can go to a bookshop.org and order a book from there. And then the proceeds of that go to the indie bookstores that are part of that organization. A lot of indie bookstores don't have online ordering. So if you would like to order from one, and you're not sure where to go, definitely head to bookshop.org.

[00:03:33] **Sumaiyya** Something that's really interesting that I came across on Twitter is how there are many bookstores that actually take orders on Twitter or even on the phone. I actually did not know about that. And I think it's such a great way that, you know, independent bookstores function anyway. And there is such a community feeling when it comes to the way that these bookstores interact with readers.

[00:03:55] **Kendra** Definitely. I really appreciate how there's so much creativity happening right now as well. I know that Old Town Books is going to be hosting some virtual classes with authors. And so you buy a ticket to that event, and you have an online virtual workshop. And the price of that author's book is included in the ticket price, which is a fabulous idea. I've been so impressed with the creativity of these stores.

[00:04:20] **Sumaiyya** Yeah. It's almost like going to an author event. That's awesome.

[00:04:24] **Kendra** Exactly. But it's great for people, like me, who can't get out. And it makes things also really accessible. I think one of the things that this crisis has taught us is that we can make work and school and situations more accessible.

[00:04:39] **Sumaiyya** Definitely. That's actually what I was about to say, that, you know, this has shown us that we could be doing more.

[00:04:46] **Kendra** We hope all of you are staying inside and staying safe and that you're with your loved ones and are taking care of each other out there.

[00:04:54] **Sumaiyya** And that you have a lot of books to keep you company. And if you don't, then hopefully these episodes that we're about to do will really help you with that.

[00:05:05] **Kendra** We are always here to increase our TBRs.

[00:05:07] **Sumaiyya** Yes. That's our job.

[00:05:11] **Kendra** Well, this month, we're talking about marriage stories—which, Sumaiyya, was one of the first themes that you picked for this year.

[00:05:20] **Sumaiyya** Yeah, so we will be discussing books that feature married couples. And one of us is married, and it's not me. So as a Muslim who is in her twenties, I do spend a lot of time thinking about marriage and what it means to me. So I wanted to talk about books with Kendra that looked at marital relationships because I feel like it's so, so intense and complicated and intimate. And I'm really excited about the books that we've selected.

[00:05:50] **Kendra** And one of the things that I have learned, I mean, since getting married—and I got married, oh, wow, I'm old . . . I got married seven years ago—so one of the things I've learned, though, is that all marriages look differently. And I think oftentimes, before I got married and even after I got married, it was this . . . there was this ideal marriage that I was trying to achieve in my head. But that's not how it works because there's no marriage like yours. Right? You're married to someone, and that's a unique relationship. And that's one of the things I liked about all of these books is that each the books that we're going to talk about today represents a unique relationship.

[00:06:31] **Sumaiyya** Definitely. And just a side note, I feel like this is something that I've learned in my own life, even though I'm not yet married, but I have been looking at, you know, what I expect from marriage, what I would bring to a marriage. And one of the things that me and my Muslim friends always talk about is how we all have this idea of what marriage is supposed to be. But as we grow older, as we learn and educate ourselves, we discover our individualities. And that kind of gives us a better idea of what we would be interested in rather than the formula that seems to exist in society sometimes, which actually is a fantasy.

[00:07:12] **Kendra** Yes, exactly. And I think that when you realize that this idea of marriage is a fantasy and not a reality, I think it frees you up to then be more open minded to the different possibilities for your marriage and what it might look like, whether you do get married or maybe the future of a marriage that you're currently in.

[00:07:33] **Sumaiyya** So my first pick for marriage stories is *SOFIA KHAN IS NOT OBLIGED* by Ayisha Malik. This is a backlist title that was published by twenty7 in 2015. And I think, Kendra, you've read this book.

[00:07:48] **Kendra** I did. It's so wonderful. I laughed so hard.

[00:07:52] **Sumaiyya** Yeah. And it's actually one of the first books that I read that features a Muslim character who was entertaining, relatable, and kind of like not wrapped up in the usual stereotypes that we tend to see Muslim characters subjected to in fiction or even in the media, actually. So this book is written in a diary format. And that diary belongs to Sofia Khan.

[00:08:18] **Sumaiyya** She is a British Muslim who lives with her family in London. She works in publishing, which is my dream job. So her colleagues actually get intrigued about the Muslim dating scene when she tells them about her latest dating disaster. And yeah. So she explains to them how, compared to Western dating, it's really different because it's essentially the modern Muslim version of approaching arranged marriage. It's basically a when a man and a woman date with the intention to find a partner for marriage. And that's completely different to what Western dating is, I think, because it's very casual. Right?

[00:08:59] **Kendra** I also dated with the intent to marry. So I'm not exactly the best person to ask about this!

[00:09:06] **Sumaiyya** I'm generalizing there. So that's why these conversations are so important to have. Anyway. So Sofia's boss tells her to write a book about Muslim dating based on her personal experiences. As the story unfolds, we get to know more about Sofia's family life, her parents' marriage, also her sister who is engaged to be married. So we see her personal life and also the struggles that she is going through. And because this book is essentially her diary, we see the inner life of Sofia. And we see the complications

that come up as she tries to find a man who she is compatible with, being a modern Muslim woman who is kind of in between cultures because she has a South Asian heritage and she was born and raised in the UK. Sofia is sure about what she wants and does not necessarily want to compromise in the way that previous generations were expected to.

[00:10:01] **Sumaiyya** One thing that stands out about Ayisha Malik's treatment of the character is that she is an imperfect Muslim. And that makes her realistic because she experiences the highs and lows of faith. And I really appreciated this in the book. We often see Muslim characters who are so boring because they're portrayed as either completely good, pure Muslims or sinful wrongdoers. Like there's this, you know, like polar opposites. And they're really bland characters in a way. They're really basic. When this book was published in 2015, it was quite remarkable at that time to have a Muslim female character who swears sometimes, who enjoys the occasional cigarette, and who also wears the hijab. And she prays. And you know, she's sure about her faith as a Muslim.

[00:10:53] **Sumaiyya** So this book is a romantic comedy. And Sofia does find someone by the end of the book. And I don't really think this is a spoiler because it's a romance novel. Their story as a married couple actually extends in the second book, which is THE OTHER HALF OF HAPPINESS. And I feel like I'm cheating a bit because this book selection is actually two books if you'd like the complete experience of Sofia Khan's story, which, you know, captures the highs and lows of life and of marriage and of basically, you know, finding the right partner for yourself.

[00:11:26] **Kendra** And it's a wild ride. I really loved it. And I think that, you know, Sofia Khan finds herself in so many different situations. And also the practical life, everyday life of a Muslim woman—like finding a room to pray at work and what it's like when you have your rear end in the air and someone walks in accidentally not realizing you're using the room for prayer. You know, like, just these really funny situations that just point out how her life is and the difficulties of that. But also the triumphs of that. It's a beautiful book.

[00:12:04] **Sumaiyya** Yeah, definitely. And it shows you like Islamophobia as it's experienced by people. And you know, just how she manages everything while also trying to find, you know, someone to settle down with. And, you know, someone who hopefully does not make her compromise the things that she believes in. And that's so important, especially in today's day and age, I think. So that was SOFIA KHAN IS NOT OBLIGED by Ayisha Malik. Kendra, can you tell us about your first pick for marriage stories?

[00:12:33] **Kendra** Yes. So I picked a memoir for my first pick, and that is BROWN, WHITE, BLACK: AN AMERICAN FAMILY AT THE INTERSECTION OF RACE, GENDER, SEXUALITY, and RELIGION by Nishta J. Mehra, and that's out by Picador. And this book is about Nishta's marriage to her wife.

[00:12:52] **Kendra** Now Nishta is a Indian American woman who went to a Christian school, but her family is practicing Hindus. And then you have also she married a white woman, and then they adopted a African American child, who ends up being gender queer. And so you have this very complex story of what her marriage and what her family looks like and how that's different than the norm. And I thought it was really important as we're looking at this portrait of marriage that we look at a queer marriage and what that looks like for them. You know, Nishta is . . . I believe she's bisexual. And so she did have a relationship with a man. And how her more traditional Indian parents thought that she was cured of her "problems." And, you know, how that relationship with her parents changed,

depending on who she was with. And when she eventually married a woman, it was a big, big deal for her family.

[00:13:59] **Sumaiyya** Yeah. So that sounds like an incredible book. And you mentioned that they adopted a son. So does she discuss that process of adoption? And, you know, like motherhood in general in this book? Because I feel like it's a very nontraditional kind of family. And it does reflect in so many ways what a family in America is right now. You know, the different ways that that definition is changing.

[00:14:27] **Kendra** Definitely. And I find it really interesting because she does talk about adoption and their process of adopting and, as two adoptive parents, what they wanted to do with that. And just the practical things like, you know, what would their child call them? Would it be confusing? But then when they adopted Shiv, who is black, and they would be a very much a multiracial family. She talks about the different reactions that people had. So with her wife, who is white, they would always be thanking her for adopting Shiv. But with her, it's like, you know, she is Indian. So she could be married to a man who was black. You know, it could be her biological kid and just the differences of that, how people treated her when they see her with a child that isn't her own race or appears not to be and how complicated that is on an everyday basis. Just even going to the supermarket is complicated sometimes.

[00:15:27] **Sumaiyya** Yeah. And I think that kind of family setup would reveal the biases and prejudices that people would have in general, like, you know, the preconceived notions that people come up with when they look at such a multiracial family. So it sounds like an incredible book, and I'm so glad I already have a copy of this. I can't believe that I haven't read it, you know. It's been sitting on my shelf for a while now.

[00:15:54] **Kendra** I found really interesting was how people perceive the relationship of Shiv and their various adults in their life. And so you have, you know, Nishta's mom (Shiv's grandmother) who only speaks Hindi to Shiv upon Nishta's request so that Shiv will learn the language because Nishta had to learn it almost as second language because her parents spoke English to her or she only spoke English. And you know how that often happens when you immigrate to another country. And so I found it very interesting in how they're raising Shiv in, you know, that Hindu religion and just that experience.

[00:16:36] **Kendra** And I wanted to also note that later, after the book came out, that they now use she/her pronouns for Shiv. So at the end of the book, it's noted that Shiv is most likely gender nonconforming or something like that, but they're not sure because Shiv is so young. And at the point that I went, and I was looking up Nishta's website and different things on social media, they now use she/her pronouns. So it appears that Shiv is trans. So being a trans Black girl is going to be very complicated. And so I kind of hope there's a follow up memoir to this. So that is **BROWN, WHITE, BLACK: AN AMERICAN FAMILY AT THE INTERSECTION OF RACE, GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND RELIGION** by Nishta J. Mehra. And, Sumaiyya, you have the next pick.

[00:17:23] **Sumaiyya** Yeah, so my discussion pick is **A PURE HEART** by Rajia Hassib, published by Viking in the US and Scepter in the UK. It's available in print and digital formats, along with the audiobook version. So **A PURE HEART** is the story of two Egyptian Muslim sisters who are polar opposites in terms of their personalities and priorities. And as a result of this, they choose very different paths in life.

[00:17:50] **Sumaiyya** Rose is the "modern" sister, who is an Egyptologist fascinated by ancient Egypt. And this is definitely reflected in the narrative of the novel. She marries an American journalist, Mark, who has lived in the Arab world for a few years and who actually also converts to Islam for her. And they decide to move to New York. Gameela, on the other hand, is conventionally religious. She wears the hijab, and it's actually a decision that her family supports, but simultaneously they cause her to feel isolated from them because they are quite non-religious as a Muslim family. So these differences in the sisters' choices in life actually cause tension between them, kind of like sibling rivalry—but in a natural way, you know, because sometimes as siblings grow up to be different, they have different expressions of the same faith.

[00:18:48] **Sumaiyya** When the story begins, we find out that Gameela has died in a suicide bombing. And Rose is grieving for her sister's death and trying to piece together Gameela's life in the final months. And she, interestingly, does that by excavating her sister's room and collecting some of her personal items that she takes back to New York. From the start of this story, we also know that Rose actually blames her husband, Mark, for her sister's death. And this puts a strain on their marriage.

[00:19:18] **Sumaiyya** The narrative has several perspectives that go back and forth in time. And the backdrop of the family drama is the Arab Spring in Egypt. So one aspect of the story actually looks at the radicalization of the character and eventually explores how a series of events results in the bombing and Gameela's death. Basically, we get to know more about why Rose blames her husband (the journalist), what role he played, and how Gameela gets entangled in all of it. Is it because she was in the wrong place at the wrong time? Or is there something more to the story? And that really is the mystery at the heart of this beautiful novel.

[00:19:58] **Kendra** And going on our theme of marriage, one of the things also that's in the book is how Mark and Rose's relationship . . . like, you always wonder, "Are they going to stay together in the end?" Is their relationship—is their marriage—going to make it? And the way that that flows back and forth and the way that the timeline jumps back and forth is so beautifully done.

[00:20:21] **Sumaiyya** Yeah. And you know, that crisis in their marriage actually shows you the different sides that exist in Rose. And I think this is actually discussed in the book, at one point, where she thinks about how she needs to reconcile Rose the sister and Rose the wife, you know, because one part of her is grieving for her sister's death. And the other part of her loves this man who she believes might be, you know, might in some way have caused her sister's death.

[00:20:52] **Sumaiyya** So it's really complicated when that kind of a burden is placed on a person, you know, and they have to deal with the loss. And also maybe the loss that might happen as a result of that death, which is, you know, the loss of her marriage. So, yeah, the book does lead towards, you know, that moment in their relationship where they either decide to stay together or, you know, get a divorce and go their separate ways.

[00:21:20] **Kendra** And, you know, the way that it looks at a lot of complications when you have an interracial marriage like that and an interfaith marriage like that, in the sense that, well, yeah, he converted. . . . But then there's a lot of stigma around that and how she married a man who is not Egyptian and then left. And that was really interesting as someone, you know, who is not Muslim and from the West, to see that culture played out in a story like this. And it was very informative and really added a lot to the story.

[00:21:54] **Sumaiyya** Yeah. And I think it's definitely the kind of, um . . . that kind of a stigma about, you know, . . . marrying someone who was not born as a Muslim is something that exists in the Muslim community. And I was actually really impressed with the way that the author handled that and with the conversation that it opens about faith and, you know, about the way that we practice faith. It's definitely one of the more interesting aspects of the novel, which will definitely make people think a bit more about the way that they perceive their own faith and the faith of others and how, you know, that affects their relationships.

[00:22:33] **Sumaiyya** Another thing that's really interesting about this book is the political backdrop and the way that the Arab Spring and, you know, the politics in general has divided people, divided families. I feel like that's something we're seeing in America today and even in India, where families are kind of . . . have reached a point where people are taking sides politically, and that's causing rifts in their relationship. And I think it's a very interesting representation of that in this book. And it's really timely.

[00:23:07] **Kendra** And it's so well-written. I would just sit in the car and listen to the audiobook. And the way that she wrote it and her prose and the way that she handled those political topics. . . . I haven't read a ton about the Arab Spring beyond the general knowledge of it. It was very clearly written, but also very beautiful. And she makes it look easy. She's that good.

[00:23:29] **Sumaiyya** Yeah. And you know, the politics and the way that she writes it is also really balanced. So even as the author, you know, she never imposes her own political view on the reader and just lays it out and lays all of it out for the reader to see and to make up their own mind. And that's so important.

[00:23:51] **Sumaiyya** Before I read this book, when I found out about it, when I got interested in it, one of the things that made me a little apprehensive about it was the fact that we are looking at two Muslim sisters who are very different. And I wasn't sure about how the author would treat that. You know, one sister who's really outwardly religious looking and the other one who does not wear her hijab and is "modern." So I was interested in seeing how that would unfold. And I thought she did an amazing job with the way that she wrote the sisters and how their individualities actually comes through. And in the end, you realize that they're both good people, you know, regardless of how they express their faith. So that was A PURE HEART by Rajia Hassib. Kendra, what's your second pick?

[00:24:39] **Kendra** So my second pick . . . my discussion pick is LOVE FROM A TO Z by S.K. Ali. And this is from one of my favorite imprints for middle grade and YA literature, Salaam Reads. I actually went on Book Outlet and got every single one that I could find.

[00:24:57] **Sumaiyya** They are incredible. Their list is . . . Wow.

[00:25:01] **Kendra** Yes. Yes.

[00:25:03] **Sumaiyya** I have so many of their books in my wish list and in my cart that I'm going to buy in my next haul. So exciting. So tell me about LOVE FROM A TO Z.

[00:25:13] **Kendra** So I really enjoyed this book because I really wanted a book that featured teenagers that were not dating in a traditional, Western idea of dating. So in the

West, especially in a non-religious circumstance, we often see teenagers just dating to date, to have a good time. You know, you'll probably not marry this person if you date them in high school. That's not really the goal. You know? The whole thing. We've all seen the '80s teenage movies. We get the idea.

[00:25:50] **Kendra** But this book is about two individuals, and this is a romance novel. But they are two teenage Muslim characters, and they would only date if they planned on marrying that person, that you take your relationships with someone else very seriously. And so that's kind of the idea behind this book.

[00:26:08] **Kendra** And so we have Zayneb, who is an American Muslim girl from a multi-racial background. But she is a senior in high school, and she has this teacher who is very Islamophobic and hostile. She ends up standing up to him in class and getting suspended from school. And her parents are like, look, you just need to last your senior year. Go visit your aunt while you're suspended and on spring break and then come back and just finish the semester. So she goes to Qatar. And on their way, she meets a young man named Adam.

[00:26:47] **Kendra** So Adam is a biracial teenage guy whose dad is the son of Chinese immigrants, and his mom is white and Canadian. And so his dad teaches, though, at this international school in Qatar. So these two young people meet on the plane, and it's basically love at first sight because, you know . . .

[00:27:13] **Sumaiyya** But it's not insta-love.

[00:27:14] **Kendra** Yes, it's not insta-love. I would say insta-infatuation. Like they see each other. And it's like, you know, you see a cute person on the plane that you're on. And then circumstances come around, and they realize that Zayneb's aunt was good friends with Adam's mom.

[00:27:34] **Kendra** One of the things I really loved about this book is that Adam is going home because he's leaving university because he's recently been diagnosed with MS, which is what his mom died of. And he doesn't really have the heart to tell his dad that his son has the same disease that took his mom. And so you have also—while Zayneb is like dealing with this teacher—Adam's storyline deals with his journey of being recently diagnosed with MS. And seeing a chronic illness portrayed in this way, especially for a young man to have a chronic illness like this, is pretty rare in books. And yeah, it just all came together in such a beautiful way.

[00:28:10] **Sumaiyya** Yeah, I really enjoyed reading this book, especially because it was set in the Middle East, so it's set in Doha, Qatar. And it reminded me of home. And that's, you know, like just the general set up and just the feel of the city that she evokes through her writing. I think it was brilliant because she does mention quite a few places that they visit in in Doha.

[00:28:38] **Kendra** Yeah, I've never been there, but I feel like she painted such a beautiful picture of the different, you know, museums that are there. And there's even like this, you know, dog rescue they visit and a lot of different things like that.

[00:28:52] **Sumaiyya** Yeah. They go to the beach. And I feel like if you are someone who loves to travel and likes to visit places through fiction, then this is definitely a book to add to your list.

[00:29:06] **Sumaiyya** And another reason that I actually really was happy about this book is the kind of Muslim representation that we get in this book . . . because I feel like a lot of times, as someone who is Muslim, and you know, obviously a lot of the YA that I read—or I used to read—would focus on insta-love and just, you know, just these random relationships that people end up in. And it didn't appeal to me because I feel like there's kind of this sense of maturity in young Muslims and especially in my community that I've seen and people. And that's usually not reflected in the books that I was reading.

[00:29:48] **Sumaiyya** When I read a YA that has Muslim characters, and I see that maturity reflected in them, it's like being seen in a way. And this is finally one of those YA books that I can say that I enjoyed. And, you know, just truly found that it was really enriching as an experience and just a beautiful story that celebrates, you know, young love and also individuals who are going through difficult circumstances.

[00:30:21] **Kendra** And I really appreciated the maturity that you were talking about because, you know, they will go into a relationship. But they're always chaperoned, and they would never physically touch before they were married. And I feel like a lot of people think that that is beyond teenagers, that they're not able to control themselves. There's this idea that's often portrayed in YA novels that teenagers just aren't responsible like that. But they are very serious in their approach to their relationship. They include their families. They evaluate their relationship like, "Would this work in a marriage?" And they take it very seriously. And I think that's something that we need to see more of in YA books, especially for, you know, religious teenagers who want to see their choices in a book, you know?

[00:31:06] **Sumaiyya** Yeah. And I think this is something that . . . this kind of maturity is definitely something you see more of in teenagers, more like in their later teens, who are in high school, who are seniors in high school, and who know what their next step in life is. You know, especially in terms of education. And they kind of have this idea of what they want in life that's developing. And at the same time, if a person comes along who fits along with that idea, you know, then why not? Like, if you feel like this person would be compatible for you in marriage, then I feel like a lot of young Muslims today are opting for this approach where they're quite young. They go to college together as well. And I personally know of people who have done that, who met someone that, you know, they really liked. And the families liked each other. And they decided, Okay, let's study together and get married while we're doing it.

[00:32:03] **Kendra** So obviously, we have so much that we want to discuss about this book because, you know, we talked about it for I don't know how long when you first read it. So this is our second discussion pick. And so our next episode, we'll be talking all about this book and all of our feelings around it and how much we loved it and its various levels of great representation. So. So that is LOVE FROM A TO Z by S.K. Ali. And that's out here in the US from Salaam Reads.

[00:32:36] **Kendra** And our guest this month is our contributor, Joce. She is the BookTuber (@squibblesreads). And she's also a co-blogger at The Quiet Pond. And of course, all of her information will be linked in our show notes. But when I thought of someone who would have a lot of great marriage story kind of stories, I don't know what it says, but Joce came to mind. And so she is here to recommend two picks that she thinks would go great with this theme.

[00:33:05] **Joce** Hi, my name is Joce. I am mainly on BookTube, but I have taken a brief hiatus at my channel called SquibblesReads. And you can also find me on Twitter and Instagram (@squibblesreads). And I'm a co-blogger at a blog called The Quiet Pond, which is thequietpond.com. And of course, I am here as a Reading Women contributor.

[00:33:25] **Joce** So I personally work in the mental health field. And my background is in social psychology, cognitive psychology. And one of my favorite things to do is just dissect kind of like the everyday life of people. And of course, in everyday life, people are naturally social human beings, as we have discovered from this coronavirus pandemic in that teenagers in particular just kind of want to get out of the house and go hang out with their friends.

[00:33:54] **Joce** And a lot of times we find that when we are in periods of isolation, we really just want to connect with other people. And a way that people are doing that right now is through their phones. And I think human beings just have a natural tendency to want to connect with other people in some way. And so for me personally, I am super interested in marriages, relationships, families, everything like that. That's all very interesting to me.

[00:34:21] **Joce** My first pick today is called THE BROMANCE BOOK CLUB by Lyssa Kay Adams. So our main character is . . . the man's name is Gavin Scott. He is a professional baseball player for the National Legends. And he and his wife, Thea, are having some troubles in their marriage. One night they get into a big fight, and he finds out that she has always faked her orgasms. And that was the straw that broke the camel's back. And then Thea asks for a divorce. Gavin stays the night in a hotel. And that is kind of where the story opens.

[00:34:50] **Joce** So eventually he ends up opening up to some of his friends who are kind of these like high falutin men in national society and stereotypically masculine jobs. So like athletes, sports-related jobs, stuff like that. And they have formed this secret romance book club, and they read romance novels in order to learn what women need. And basically, they fix their relationships to improve communication and restore their marriages. And ultimately, these guys all come together and be vulnerable with one another and help Gavin rebuild his trust and his marriage with Thea.

[00:35:27] **Joce** So this book is like extremely genius. First and foremost, it completely destroys any stereotypes of the romance novel genre. So a lot of times people dismiss romance as like chick lit or things that ditzy women read, you know, all that kind of stuff. And these stereotypes come from a place of "because women enjoy it." You know, the as occupations that are woman dominant or caretaking professions, which are undermined because like the social underpinning is the belief that feminine things are inferior, which is very unfortunate and very patriarchal. But alas, here we are.

[00:36:05] **Joce** But in actual fact, there is a ton of strength to be had in, kind of like, the direct mirroring of real life in romance novels in the soft and vulnerable way. So all of these men have to embody this willingness to be emotional, which is difficult a lot of the times, especially kind of in this community because the wives are defined as like baseball-players wives, you know, like in relation to their husband's profession. So there are these toxic-masculine messages that are embedded and learned, kind of, in this community.

[00:36:39] **Joce** So when they start this book club, all these men kind of uncover that they weren't sharing their feelings with each other in their personal lives because they had all

this ego and reputation in the community. And they started this book club because they all at one point had issues in their marriage. And I just want to give you guys a quote from the book. "Romance novels are primarily written by women for women. And they're entirely about how they want to be treated and what they want out of life and in a relationship. We read them to become more comfortable expressing ourselves and to look at things from their perspective."

[00:37:15] **Joce** Yeah! So basically, the first book that these guys read in their book club is a Regency romance novel. And I'm going to read . . . she has another quote, and at the end of this quote, there are cuss words, which I love. Unfortunately, I will edit them for this podcast. So the quote is, "Modern romance novelists use the patriarchal society of old British aristocracy to explore the gender-based limitations placed on women today in both the professional and personal spheres. That [stuff] is feminist [AF]." So it really just kind of like breaks down romance novels and totally like blasts these stereotypes and into the universe, which I absolutely love.

[00:37:59] **Joce** One last thing that I really enjoyed about this is that you can kind of see how the marriage and relationship models trickle down generationally. So Thea's father—he was a serial cheater. And every time her mother relented and let him back in, Thea kind of created this natural defense mechanism. And her modeled response is kind of to do the opposite of what her mother did, which is to put up walls and kind of withhold forgiveness just kind of in arguments and especially kind of in this big break in her relationship with Gavin.

[00:38:33] **Joce** This book is really special because it is the first book that I've read that takes romance novels in particular in this kind of meta way, you know, talking about books in a book, extremely meta. But we love that stuff in the book community. But this is the first one that does that with romance novels. And in particular, it dismantles how romance novels can really help in kind of like a fictional way, not directly in a self-help book kind of way, but it can really help marriage dynamics and communication. And we see that directly reflected in Gavin's use of the book in his own marriage. So it's really like a reflection of sometimes I use things, you know, that I've learned in fiction books to kind of help myself in life as inspiration or how I directly relate to a character. So it's really . . . it's cute in a meta kind of way.

[00:39:22] **Joce** Well, I would definitely recommend this book to any adult readers of any gender. This is an adult romance novel. So readers who would like romance novels would definitely appreciate this in like a Praise. Bless. Yes. Finally! kind of way. But readers who don't like romance novels would appreciate this in an eye-opening way.

[00:39:43] **Joce** And I think especially kind of during these times, like during this pandemic, some of us . . . our relationship dynamics have really shifted. So, for example, whether that's being stuck in the house with our partner or spouse 24/7 or whether ourselves or a partner or spouse is kind of in a riskier situation at the hospital, working the frontlines, you know, and we may need to isolate. . . . Something that I saw on Instagram lately is that we're all being forced to revert back to basics now, whether it's just the basics of communication and connection with immediate family, just boiling down the basics kind of in a complex way.

[00:40:20] **Joce** And I would also recommend the book to people who want to dismantle the patriarchy. So this book, again, is called THE BROMANCE BOOK CLUB by Lyssa Kay Adams.

[00:40:29] **Joce** My second pick today is PERMANENT RECORD by Mary H.K. Choi. This is a YA contemporary novel. Our main character is named Pablo Neruda Rind, and he is a half Korean, half Pakistani teenage boy. He lives in New York City, and he works at a bodega that is run by a Korean couple. One day by chance, at 4:00 in the morning, he meets a huge celebrity teen pop star. Pseudonym is Leanna Smart. Her real name is Carolina Suarez, and he calls her "Lea." They end up starting a huge whirlwind relationship that has Pablo traveling all over the globe with Lea while kind of dealing with stuff at home.

[00:41:08] **Joce** And this book is really kind of comparable to a slice-of-life anime or manga series because you really feel like you've been dropped into their lives, like by parachute, because you see all of these preexisting conflicts and these lingering remaining effects from things like generational relationships and challenges from the past.

[00:41:29] **Joce** This is really interesting because I know this episode is called "Marriage Stories," and I picked a YA contemporary novel. And you're probably thinking like, "WTF. What is she doing?" But really, it's really, really kind of a complex book. And this is what I love about it. So there are two kind of different relationships that we can see in the book. So the first one is between Pablo and Lea and the second one is between Pablo's mom and dad.

[00:41:56] **Joce** So starting with the first one, Pablo and Lea's relationship, they have a ton of similarities. They're both biracial. They both love social media and all the things like that. But the main difference is their socioeconomic status and wealth. And that puts a big strain on the relationship.

[00:42:19] **Joce** So first, Pablo, he is in debt. He is behind on a lot of his bills. They're sending him to the collections agency, etc. This is in stark contrast to Lea, who is obviously one of the most well-known pop stars. She flies on private jets. She's a black Amex card. She's emancipated from her parents at a young age, and she's managed most of her money by herself with the help of a manager. So over the course of the book, you see her financial privilege because being wealthy, you know, she doesn't have to blink before handing over her credit card for a meal or other basic needs where a lot of Pablo's decisions—even meeting his basic needs, let alone like purchasing a lavish outfit—you know, a lot of them revolve around money.

[00:43:01] **Joce** But Pablo, he's kind of independent in another way. So he has had to, you know, work at this bodega to just earn a little bit above minimum wage to pay for everything in his life. And he's also had to deal with the effects of the dynamics of his parents' marriage. So now we're kind of moving on to their relationship.

[00:43:22] **Joce** So like I was saying, his mom is Korean, and his dad is Pakistani. And he's from Jersey. And they are actually separated, which I think is something that you don't often see in YA books. You're seeing it more now, but definitely not in like older YA books. But his mom is a doctor, and she is wealthier, and she has traditional Korean values, including high expectations academically. Where his dad has been kind of absent, never really there for him, never held a consistent job, despite his pride having graduated from Princeton.

[00:43:56] **Joce** So Pablo has some anger and resentment built up towards his dad. Like I was saying, his parents are separated. And you feel kind of like this emotional separation

too. And therefore, Pablo has developed his own mental emotional coping mechanisms, which is definitely an after effect of their marriage dynamics.

[00:44:16] **Joce** And I guess finally, in both relationships, you can see the role of shame and guilt in the choices that all of these people make. So, for example, where Leanna wants to spend money on something, Pablo really can't. And you see kind of all these instinctual shame reactions coming out for him. And I kind of really felt for him in those moments.

[00:44:38] **Joce** And both of his parents carry shame around how they handled the separation and their parenting, which is totally a real thing, trying to balance their adult marriage with parenting. And they both feel shameful because they haven't done a great job at it. And I guess in conclusion, kind of all these things—finance, race, job security, parenting styles—these are all things that play such a huge role in marriage dynamics. And this is where these kind of slice-of-life books excel is taking all of these things into account with one snippet in time in someone's life.

[00:45:13] **Joce** I would recommend this book to anyone who likes young adult contemporary novels, definitely anyone who enjoys like slice-of-life, manga, and anime. And other people who kind of like real-life books where you feel like you're being transported somewhere, where you feel like you have to suspend your disbelief, particularly with Leanna's celebrity status. And this book is also set in New York City, like the very heart of New York City. And I get that kind of feel from it. So if you like books set in New York too. So again, that is PERMANENT RECORD by Mary H.K. Choi.

[00:45:48] **Sumaiyya** Thank you so much, Joce, for the books that you recommended to us today in this episode.

[00:45:53] **Kendra** So those are six picks for this month's theme of marriage stories. There are a lot of great relationships to read about. So we definitely hope that you pick some of these up, all of them, because . . .

[00:46:05] **Sumaiyya** They're all amazing books. I mean, you should listen to us when we say that.

[00:46:12] **Kendra** So now it's time for our currently reading. So, Sumaiyya, what are you reading right now?

[00:46:16] **Sumaiyya** So I'm actually reading a couple of books. The first of them is HOOD FEMINISM by Mikki Kendall. And this is an incredible book if you're looking for something that's about intersectional feminism that looks at narratives aside from the mainstream white feminist approach that we see a lot of. And the second book that I'm reading is a fiction. It's called DJINN PATROL ON THE PURPLE LINE by Deepa Anappara. I have actually only read a couple of pages of this, so I'm still not entirely sure what it's about, but it's set in India. And it looks at the case of children who go missing. Do you know, Kendra? There are like 180 kids who go missing in India every day.

[00:46:58] **Kendra** Wow.

[00:47:00] **Sumaiyya** Yeah. And this book is kind of like . . . you know, has that as the backdrop. So I'm really interested to see how that unfolds.

[00:47:08] **Kendra** It was longlisted for the women's prize as well.

[00:47:11] **Sumaiyya** Yeah, it was. It was. And it's, yeah, it's really intriguing. So what are you reading?

[00:47:17] **Kendra** I just received an email that my copy of the audiobook for THE CITY WE BECAME by N.K. Jemisin just came in as we have been talking.

[00:47:28] **Sumaiyya** Wow.

[00:47:29] **Kendra** I am going to definitely be listening to that tonight. It's not quite out yet in print, but I am so excited for this book because the last novel that she put out was the last book in the Broken Earth trilogy. And this one is about New York City and how the different boroughs are represented almost like by a god figure, like "American Gods" almost, just N.K. Jemisin and New York City. So.

[00:47:57] **Sumaiyya** That sounds incredible. And I actually haven't read her books yet, but they're at the top of my list, especially for fantasy.

[00:48:05] **Kendra** But all right. So those are the books that we are currently reading. Where can people find you about the internet, Sumaiyya?

[00:48:10] **Sumaiyya** Okay, so you can actually find me (@sumaiyya.books) on Instagram, where I review books and post updates about my life with my cat. But it's actually a fan page, you know, it's a fan page for my cat.

[00:48:28] **Kendra** Just as she deserves.

[00:48:32] **Sumaiyya** Yes.

[00:48:33] **Kendra** And you can find me (@kdwinchester) on Twitter and Instagram, where I post photos of books and links to articles I write about audiobooks and all sorts of fun things.

[00:48:49] **Kendra** All right. So that's our show. If you haven't yet, please leave us a review in your podcast app of choice. And thanks to all of you who have already done that. And of course, many thanks to our patrons, whose support makes this podcast possible. To subscribe to our newsletter or to learn more about becoming one of our patrons, visit us at readingwomenpodcast.com.

[00:49:09] **Sumaiyya** Be sure to join us next time where we'll be discussing A PURE HEART by Raija Hassib and LOVE FROM A TO Z by S.K. Ali. In the meantime, you can find Reading Women on Instagram and Twitter (@thereadingwomen). Thanks for listening.