

Ep. 86 | A Pure Heart and Love from A to Z

[00:00:08] **Kendra** Hello, I'm Kendra Winchester, here with 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 86, where we're talking about A PURE HEART by Rajia Hassib and LOVE FROM A TO Z by S. K. Ali.

[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.

[00:00:36] **Kendra** So this is our second attempt at recording this episode about marriage stories, discussing these two wonderful books. So the first one was just a practice run. You know? We're all set now.

[00:00:49] **Sumaiyya** Because we have done it once, we know that we're going to get it right this time.

[00:00:53] **Kendra** For sure. For sure. So you might have noticed, dear listeners, that there was a schedule change. And that's because I—long story short—lost the files. And so we are recording this again, but we still have all of our notes and everything. So here we are.

[00:01:11] **Sumaiyya** I just want to put it out there that technology is not always a friend.

[00:01:16] **Kendra** It's not. Especially when my poor computer is like, "I cannot contain any more storage, memory storage." And I'm like, "It's fine. I have an external hard drive." And it's like, "I'm a mac. I don't care."

[00:01:32] **Sumaiyya** I personally have this awful relationship with Skype. Never lets me sign in.

[00:01:39] **Kendra** So this is our second episode on our marriage stories theme. So I thought we could talk a little bit about why you wanted to pick this theme and where the idea came from.

[00:01:51] **Sumaiyya** Marriage is definitely something that I think about, and I think we briefly discussed that in the previous episode. I just think it's really fascinating to look at stories, you know, that may feature a couple who are married or who are dating with the intent to get married. The way that I have seen through literature and through films and just from conversations with friends from, you know, different parts of the world is that every culture and community has kind of their own way of dealing with marriage or approaching this intense and emotional and intimate relationship.

[00:02:24] **Sumaiyya** And there are so many stories that kind of come out of that. I mean, we see a lot of books that depict people falling in love and fulfilling that romantic ideal. But I'm actually more interested in stories that look at what happens to that love and relationship after marriage. How that dynamic and that . . . you know, the responsibility that comes with being in a marriage, with building a family together, like how that affects people, their relationship, and individuality in general. So one thing that I keep thinking about, you know, when I think about marriage is that there's something unique that happens in a marriage. And it is that your partner sort of becomes this extension of who you are. And each person's identity undergoes a change.

[00:03:10] **Sumaiyya** In the Muslim and South Asian tradition, women actually traditionally leave their family to join their husband's home. So marriage in itself is a migration of a kind, a sort of a displacement that I think, in my community at least, we're afraid to title it as a displacement because marriage represents this purity. And in the Islamic perspective, it's kind of this fulfillment of your faith. And I find that really fascinating that, you know, a woman's identity particularly goes through so much change. So there's a lot of stories to be talked about from that perspective.

[00:03:45] **Sumaiyya** Another thing that really fascinates me is how access to education, to travel, migration in general, and different cultural intersections have changed the way that people approach marriage. And it has opened up new possibilities. And finally, I think marriage stories is an interesting theme because you're not only looking at family dynamics, but it's also revealing gender roles and relationships between genders. And, you know, the conversation around that in general is something that comes up when you look at a marriage.

[00:04:18] **Kendra** And I, especially as someone from a Western perspective, I found it very interesting to see these two books that we've just chosen interacting with a lot of Western stereotypes about women who marry and, you know, marry in this way and leave their families and are maybe in arranged marriage or maybe they're in a courtship. There's this Western idea that they're not . . . they're not activists. They're not independent. They're not educated. There's all of these really terrible stereotypes around that. And both of these books look at those stereotypes and upend them, turn them on their head and be like, no, that's not the reality of the situation in all of these different ways. Like Zayneb is an activist. Right? And in A PURE HEART, the husband is the one who converts and leaves his family's religion to join his wife's because he loves her. And I loved that. I loved seeing how these different marriages play out in these novels. And they're really a great pairing, once you sit down and you start thinking about them together.

[00:05:21] **Sumaiyya** Yeah. I'm really happy with the books and especially how they work together because we are seeing characters who are, you know, going outside the stereotypical narrative form that we have. And it's so important for me to kind of highlight those types of stories that complicates the Muslim experience, especially the experience of young women. And one thing that we have common in these books is how they portray the hijab. So, for example, in A PURE HEART, you have Gameela. And you know, we're going to talk a bit about her relationship to her job. But in general, like what happens there is Gameela's family, or the community that she is a part of, does not really. . . . They're there kind of a bit adverse to the fact that she wears hijab, but they don't, like, discourage her. They're still supportive of her, but they think differently. And in LOVE FROM A TO Z, we're seeing this young woman whose family, you know, encourages the hijab. And also that's such a central part of her identity. And there is no conflict to that side of her from the people around her. And they actually nurture her to kind of, you know, be who she is and experience that. So all I . . . basically what I want to say here is there's so many different experiences with the hijab, and stereotypes kind of overshadow that. So it's good to have books like these.

[00:06:40] **Kendra** Yeah. And you know, we read a book last year called IT'S NOT ABOUT THE BURKA that really talked about these different ways as well. And for those of you in the US, it's finally coming out in the US this year. I don't know if it's publishing date has been moved at this point, but I will link it down below so that you can go check it out,

preorder, and support that anthology because if you love this episode, you will also love that book.

[00:07:02] **Sumaiyya** Definitely. That has so many different perspectives from women, from Muslim women from all walks of life. And they talk about, you know, all these issues that generally are not really at the center stage. So it's a good book. I always recommend it to everyone.

[00:07:17] **Kendra** Yes, I was one. I was like, "Mom, you should read this book. You would like it."

[00:07:24] **Sumaiyya** Yeah, my mom has a copy of it as well. She's planning to read it soon.

[00:07:27] **Kendra** You know, I think your mom and my mom should start a book club.

[00:07:31] **Sumaiyya** You've said that before. I'm pretty sure. Like we've talked about it. It would be pure gold on the internet if that ever happened.

[00:07:39] **Kendra** We'll have to pitch it to them. We'll give you all guys updates after we'll see what they say. Well, Sumaiyya, you have the first discussion pick that we're gonna talk about today.

[00:07:49] **Sumaiyya** So my discussion pick for this episode is A PURE HEART by Rajia Hassib. And we talked briefly about this book last time. So just to recap from that. This is a story of two sisters who are quite different and have chosen very different paths in life. Rose is an American Egyptian who is passionate about Egyptology and ancient Egypt. She lives in New York with her husband, Mark. He is someone who converted to Islam in order to be able to marry her. Her younger sister is Gameela. She lives in Cairo with her parents. She's the more traditional of the pair. So in a way, she's "more conservative" than her other sister.

[00:08:29] **Sumaiyya** So when this story begins, we find out that Gameela has died, and Rose is grieving the untimely loss of her sister. As an Egyptologist, Rose believes that if she examines her sister's possessions, she'll be able to better understand her sister and her final months in life because there's a lot of mystery regarding that. I actually thought that this was a poignant setup because the loss of someone is obviously really difficult to deal with. But it's more complicated when you become aware of how little you knew them, and you can't really go back to them to get answers. That's basically the kind of sibling dynamic that we have in this book.

[00:09:07] **Sumaiyya** But the book is also set during the Arab Spring revolution of 2012 in Egypt and the family tensions that it creates in the society. We also have the point of view of an individual who becomes radicalized in prison. So I'd say there's a lot of social, political, and personal tension in the story. Another thing that obviously, from the perspective of looking at marriage in the story, what's interesting is that Rose believes that her husband, Mark, is in some way responsible for her sister's death. So it looks at how that kind of complicates their relationship and Rose's feelings towards him.

[00:09:47] **Kendra** And this book has just this really well-crafted tension throughout the book of whether or not Rose and her husband, Mark, are going to stay together. And it's how will their marriage weather this. So it jumps back and forth in time. We see how they

got together and all the difficulties that they got through before this point. But after Rose's sister dies, they have this really difficult tension between them. And it's like Rose doesn't want to voice that she blames her husband, but Mark still knows. And so they have a lot of discussion about that. And I think it's really interesting because, like in *SOFIA KHAN IS NOT OBLIGED*, when you have two people who get married from two different cultures, there's a lot already going on in their relationship even before this tension comes up after Gameela dies.

[00:10:36] **Sumaiyya** Yeah, there's a lot of complexity when it comes to them as individuals and their relationship to each other. And, you know, the grief obviously is something that's difficult in itself to bear. But when there's this idea that your husband might in some way be responsible, then that creates a whole new layer of tension and just, you know, this unsettling feeling between the pair. And one thing that I really appreciated about this book is how it's . . . you know, these characters are so complex. But the more you read, the more familiar you become with them. And you start to root for their marriage, and you don't want to see them hurt. And I think it's kind of beautiful when a story is able to bring that protectiveness in the reader. And this book does that really well. Obviously, like because this is a book that I read with the intention of understanding the theme of marriage in fiction, I naturally wanted to see them, you know, work things out and just kind of see this positive growth in their marriage, regardless of the troubles that they're facing.

[00:11:42] **Kendra** The way that the author wrote these characters made them so alive and so vibrant so quickly. And I hadn't realized how invested I was in the book until I was sitting in the car, listening to the audiobook, and I didn't want to go inside, which is weird because I could just take my headphones and stuff with me. But I was so invested in the way that this book unfolds. And by the time that you have Rose going to Egypt to talk to her family and try to figure out some of the mysteries of Gameela's life. . . . Yeah, you're very invested very quickly. It's very good. I mean, I'm just going to say that over and over.

[00:12:19] **Sumaiyya** I think I'm going to gush about this book for a while. And it's definitely joined the list of, I would say at least the top ten favorites of all time. And, you know, to add to that, I would say that the way that the narrative moves seamlessly between Egypt and the America, I think that adds a lot of credibility to Rajia Hassib as a writer, that she's faithfully able to depict these, you know, vastly different societies and their realities and the characters who come from that. And the way that she writes about, you know, the coming of these two cultures and these people who represent them, it's really beautiful. And I love seeing stories like that, you know, that celebrate individuals who come together despite the differences in their background.

[00:13:04] **Kendra** And it it's really interesting to see, you know, also Rose and Mark going back to his home in West Virginia. And, you know, he converted to Islam. And he told his mom, like basically he felt like it was just a different way to worship the same God. And his mom very much disagreed. And it was a big, tumultuous way to start out their relationship. And there's also stigma on the other side where Gameela feels . . . it's almost like she is still holding onto some sort of shame that her sister married a man who converted to Islam, and there's a lot of stigma around that. And so it's like Rose and Mark are in an island unto themselves, trying to figure out their relationship amidst all of this family turmoil and cultural turmoil. And they have some really insightful conversations about it as well that are really well-crafted on the page.

[00:13:57] **Sumaiyya** Yeah. And even Rose's perspective reveals a lot about faith and the conversation around that when you're coming from different faiths and in general, like

within the same faith, how there are different types of people and the different ways that people practice their religion. So I know that both of us really love books that kind of look at that personal experience of faith and, in general, the community experience of faith. And I was so fulfilled when I read this book. Yeah. So it's really interesting to see because, you know, even within the same religion—or even actually within the same family—you have people whose experiences with faith are so different. The two sisters have a very different relationship to their religious identity. And I think Rajia describes this at one point, and it's quite beautifully done when she says that faith is the center of Gameela's being and identity, whereas it is part of Rose's self. So I think that's very interesting to read about.

[00:14:54] **Sumaiyya** And as for Mark and the way that, you know, his family disapproves of his conversion and, you know, his relationship with Rose and the way that all of that has developed, it's so important for me to see a story like that where someone converts to Islam and, you know, they get married because that is something that our religion allows. Like within the religion, it is . . . Islam is a religion where you have like this acceptance of people regardless of their ethnicity or the background that they're from. I mean, regardless of their ethnicity and race. And the way that this is practiced in real life is quite different. And it's disappointing to see because while the religion is inclusive, people are not. So I want to see more stories where we have this.

[00:15:45] **Sumaiyya** And Mark and Rose are both characters, I would say, who have multitudes or like different sides to them. And in this book, we kind of see how they're struggling to, you know, bring both sides of themselves together, particularly Rose. I mean, as someone who's Gameela's sister, she has to think about grief. And she has to think about the conflict that has happened between her and Mark. And she also has to think of herself as Mark's wife. So she's trying to align those two selves together. So it was interesting to read about that as well.

[00:16:19] **Kendra** I recently was listening to a podcast, and they were talking about the multiple coming of ages that people have over the course of time. So we typically think of "coming of age" as from adolescence to adulthood. But it's kind of moving from one's self to another. And I feel in that way for Rose, this is a coming-of-age story where she has one life where her sister is alive, and now she has a different life where her sister is no longer alive. And she's having to move from one self to actively having a sister—who is in Egypt, but, you know, she's still there—to no longer having her. And that transition. . . . How does that look like? Does this include Mark? Like, what is going on? And this is like a big life change for her . . . not just in regards to grief and dealing with that, but also how she sees herself and how she sees herself and Mark's future and working that out. And I felt like, in that way, this is a coming-of-age story for Rose, just in a different way than we would typically think.

[00:17:17] **Sumaiyya** Yeah. That's actually fascinating. I'd love to hear that podcast episode, so send me a link. Yeah, that's really fascinating. That's really fascinating. Because like I remember at one point, she is trying to explain this to Mark. And she draws a line on the table with her finger, and she goes up to a point and says like, "This is my life until . . . Gamila was alive." And, you know, she moves her finger further and she says, "And that's my life now. Her's stopped, but I have to keep going on." And that really hit me hard when I read it.

[00:17:51] **Kendra** Yeah, it's a very moving book, and the way that the grief is written on the page is very personal. And you feel it along with Rose as she's trying to navigate this with her husband and living in America and studying Egypt as her job since she's like an

archeologist and curates museum exhibits and stuff. And then also interacting with the fact that one of her family members is gone and the regret that you have with that. You know, she and Gameela argued a lot about random stuff. So there's always a lot of regret when that happens.

[00:18:28] **Sumaiyya** So while Rose is dealing with the loss of her sister, obviously there are memories that are kind of coming to her mind. And it's, you know, like she is remembering all those moments where she could have supported Gameela more than she had, where she could have been a better sister. And obviously, like when someone passes away, that's always a thing I guess people would think about is, you know, the times where they were not there for them. One of the things that affects Rose is the way that she could have been more supportive of Gameela and her wearing hijab because when Gameela starts to wear the hijab, it actually sets her apart from the rest of her community and from her family. She becomes the black sheep of the family. And I felt so sad for her when her mom tells her that she looks like a peasant. There was this part in the story when that happens.

[00:19:18] **Sumaiyya** And, you know, I actually kind of related to Gameela's journey of discovering her faith and discovering her religion and all of the perspective that it brings to her life as a woman, as someone who's Muslim, in this case. I think that when you're young and you discover your faith properly as an adult, it can be very impactful, obviously, because it's an impressionable age. But while her family does not discourage her because they love her, obviously, she is quite sensitive to their treatment of her. And I liked that Rajia talked about this relationship that Gameela had with her faith and her hijab and how Rose and her family kind of have a different idea of it because I feel like the stereotypical narrative tells you that hijab is something that's forced on women, whereas a lot of times actually families don't always want their daughters to start wearing it. And I'm not saying that this is like one or two people. There are a lot of people like that. And that's also an experience of the faith. That's also a perspective that's valid. So I would say that the hijab is something that's distinct to each individual, to each woman who decides to wear it. That's very similar to the way that marriages work as well, that each marriage is unique, something that you experience in your own way, and it does not conform to a community's idea of doing things. It's always going to be a bit different to what others have experienced.

[00:20:53] **Kendra** And I think that's something that I think a lot of people, like you said, wouldn't expect—that a lot of families don't support their daughters very well. They might tolerate it or just be okay with her decision, but they wouldn't choose that for her. And I think you can see that in *SOFIA KHAN IS NOT OBLIGED* as well when she chooses to wear the hijab. And her family is very like, why are you making that choice?

[00:21:16] **Sumaiyya** Yeah, because for a lot of people, it starts to take this life of its own when someone is, you know, taking the decision to wear the hijab because it sets you apart, especially when you are living in a community that is not like you or when there are so many different types of people living in a community. And in the current climate, I would say there are a lot of people who do worry about wearing the hijab, you know, because of Islamophobia. And there are a lot of families that discourage it, not because they're uncomfortable or alienated from their faith, but actually because they're protective of their children and the way that the world would treat them if they appear a certain way. So I thought that was very interesting to see in this book because, you know, it complicates the narrative. It gives you a new conversation when it comes to hijab and just being a young Muslim woman.

[00:22:05] **Kendra** So one of the things that you and I both really liked about this book is how Rose talked about Cleopatra, who was a woman of Greek descent who was a ruler of Egypt. And there's this conversation between her and then a previous female ruler who was . . . of a different female ruler who is native to Egypt. And there's this beautiful section about this that you and I basically gushed over for a while.

[00:22:33] **Sumaiyya** Yeah, I actually . . . first of all, I loved everything that was related to ancient Egypt in this book. But I also think that she brings in a really interesting perspective when she talks about these queens and their different origins. So towards the end of the novel, you know, this actually scene . . . this scene is actually a mirror of something that happens between Rose and Mark in their first meeting. He references to Cleopatra, and Rose talks about how it's such a stereotype that everyone associates Egypt to Cleopatra.

[00:23:02] **Sumaiyya** So towards the end of the novel, she's having a conversation with her dad. And she tells him, "What is it with the Cleopatra obsession? She was Ptolemaic, not really Egyptian. Why not dress up like Nefertiti instead or Hatshepsut? She was a strong, fearless woman who ruled Egypt as an actual pharaoh at the height of the empire's power centuries before Cleopatra.' Her father, sitting in the armchair on her other side, chimes in. 'Cleopatra was of Ptolemaic origin. That does not make her less Egyptian. She ruled the country and obviously loved it. You, of all people, should not be such a purist when it comes to ethnic origin.' Rose looks up, contemplating this. She wonders why she never thought of it before. Cleopatra, the immigrant, the descendant of immigrants." So that's where it ends. Like, that's the coach that I wanted to put out.

[00:23:57] **Sumaiyya** And I think it's just such an interesting look at the idea of immigration and, you know, Rose's unwillingness herself to kind of see Cleopatra as someone who is Egyptian. And it links to the conversation about migrants and immigrants and how when they contribute to a society, when they obviously so clearly love a community, why do we continue to marginalize them, especially in history? You know, the rulers who went to a certain place and contributed to that place, as in the case of Cleopatra. So I think that it really beautifully completes the growth of Rose's character as someone who goes from thinking that Cleopatra is not Egyptian enough to her understanding that actually she is Egyptian.

[00:24:39] **Kendra** The thought process that she goes through with Cleopatra is, you know, very complex and very interesting to follow because there's a lot of complications of the power dynamic there and lots of different things. But ultimately, she realizes that, you know, moving to America, she also is an immigrant . . . and what that's like. It just reframes the way that she sees Cleopatra in this beautiful way. And I just love the way that that was handled in the book.

[00:25:07] **Sumaiyya** Yeah. And we see the same regarding Mark, where we see him as a character who within America is also a migrant. And I just wanted to end by saying that there's so much to discuss in this book. There's a lot to unpack. And I feel like our discussion of it has not done it justice because, you know, aside from all of these intense family themes and sibling themes, you also have the representation of deeper morality and questions of what it means to be pure. And you also have this character towards the second half of the book who is undergoing a radicalization when he goes to prison. So this book is actually richly layered. It's an enriching experience. And I would definitely recommend it to anyone who is looking for a complex read that gives you different

perspectives and different types of characters who are in each of their ways going through the similar battle of trying to be good. So that was A PURE HEART by Rajia Hassib.

[00:26:04] **Sumaiyya** So, Kendra, your discussion pick is something that we both loved. Can you tell us about it?

[00:26:09] **Kendra** Yes. So I picked LOVE FROM A TO Z by S. K. Ali. And that's out from one of our favorite imprint Salaam Reads, which is Middle Reader and Y.A. books with Muslim protagonists. So which is great. And I love this book because of all the things. It is a love story. And you have Zayneb and Adam. And so Zayneb is living in America when she confronts an Islamophobic teacher saying something really offensive things in class. And so she's suspended right before the end of her senior year. And so her parents are like, you know what? Go visit your aunt in Qatar, where she's teaching at this international school. It will get you way for spring break. You can come back and just finish your year. And hopefully this will help this very difficult time for you.

[00:26:57] **Kendra** On the way there, she meets a young man named Adam. And he is also Muslim. And his dad is the principal at the international school where her aunt teaches. But she doesn't know that until she meets him again at this party. And so it's really interesting to see these two get to know each other and slowly learn from each other. And they are looking to marry someone. They're not looking to date. You know that saying that I heard somewhere about how Muslims don't date; they marry. And that's really their perspective.

[00:27:33] **Sumaiyya** We actually call it . . . we actually call it "Halal Dating." Halal is like things that are permissible in our religion. So we just add that word to the dating aspect. Because Halal Dating then means that you are dating with the intent to get married, which is, you know, marriage is something that's going to fulfill half of your faith. That's another saying that we have in our religion. So, yeah. Halal Dating. It's the thing. It's so cool.

[00:28:00] **Kendra** There is this wonderful little picture that S. K. Ali put up on her social media of like the authors that are promoting social distancing. There's this whole thing. And she had like, you know, if Adam and Zayneb can social distance, you should too. And it was just the best thing I'd seen.

[00:28:18] **Sumaiyya** It was . . . it was hilarious. And I don't know if you realized, but she's actually also referring to the cover of the book. So Adam and Zayneb are clearly in an airport because you have those airport seats. And they are sitting with at least one seat between them. And there's an arrow sort of that goes above them on the cover. So it's kind of like there's this distance between them, which is like social distancing because you need to maintain some distance between each other. And I like that in these difficult times, we are kind of finding humor in books and in the things that we love. And I remember I quote-tweeted S. K. Ali's tweet. And I was like, "Halal Dating is all about that social distancing life," which is so true because in the way that we practice, you know, the approach to marriage is, you know, you have to maintain physical distance. We don't get intimate before we get married. So it's just funny to see that.

[00:29:15] **Sumaiyya** And, you know, another thing that I love about this cover is how it captures the idea of like being in an airport and like, you know. . . . Because when you travel, it's such an adventurous thing. Like, for anyone who has had the privilege of doing that, of visiting different places . . . when you are at the airport, there's so many possibilities. And, you know, you're looking forward to the adventure that you're about to

have. And what's the greatest adventure than falling in love with someone? Or meeting someone that you really like? And this cover perfectly captures that because they're looking at each other, and they're smiling at each other. And, you know, you can see that Zayneb's expression in this is like that she's not fully impressed. She's critical. And Adam is, like, smitten completely. He's looking at her with all those googly eyes. It's hilarious. I love looking deep into covers. So, yeah.

[00:30:10] **Kendra** It's true. And I love how on the back as well, there's this picture of the two of them standing. And they're not touching, but they're obviously like together. And she's laughing at him. And I feel like that's so authentic to the Muslim dating idea of that, you know. . . . And she's dressed very modestly. And I just really appreciate that they captured that on a cover because I think especially for young people, capturing their experience on a book cover is extremely important. And we've seen a lot of conversations about the need to make sure we have our, you know, black women protagonists on the cover and how they might have natural hair and like all of this conversation. But I think also that applies definitely here in the situation with Muslim dating because as we're going talk about, one of the reasons I picked this book is because I think that, you know, Muslim teenagers who do make the choice to go about dating this way need to be able to see their experiences in a romance novel because. . . . And so I think that's so encouraging for teenagers to be able to see their faith and their kind-of-like lifestyle in a book and on a book cover.

[00:31:19] **Sumaiyya** Most definitely. And I feel like Muslim readers are really aware of their own experiences because our lives . . . I would say that from the mainstream that we get off art, books, culture, film in general, like the stuff that we're consuming in a globalized world, we are really aware of the things that make us different. And we're proud of that, and we want to see more of that. And this book does it really well. I also want to say that it's really difficult for a Muslim author to come up with a story that appeals to a wide range of Muslim readers because, to be honest, the experience is so varied even within the community. And the way that this book depicts Halal Dating, it's going to appeal to the majority. And that's a huge thing. Like that's amazing.

[00:32:07] **Kendra** Yeah, because there's still lots of love and all the warm and fuzzies and like all of those things that you need for a good romance novel. But there's also an abundance of chaperones and group dating outings in public and like stuff like that that, you know, I feel like more conservative people would definitely be concerned about if there wasn't that. There's never a time where they sneak off alone or anything like that. There's always someone else in the house or present or whatever. And I think that that was just so important to the experience as well. Very much so.

[00:32:41] **Sumaiyya** Yeah. So family presence is definitely something that's underrated. And I think what sets this book apart is that when you're looking at or buying a novel or like looking at a book that shows the teenage years . . . because we spend so much time at school or with friends or, you know—I know that you were homeschooled—but I would say the mainstream teenage experience is, you know, it can be easily treated as stories where there's an almost complete absence of family and community. And this book is one of those delightful stories where you see these kids nurturing a quiet type of romance while dealing with their health or injustice. And their families are a thoughtful presence in their lives.

[00:33:23] **Sumaiyya** And that was so important for me to see because it sends such an important message to young kids that you don't have to deal with things by yourself

because, you know, during our teenage years, it's easy to feel like it's just you against the world. And we see the way that Zayneb's family encourages her to go to Qatar and, you know, spend some time there and just unwind, get away from the toxic energy. And with Adam, we see him dealing with chronic illness, which is something that we find out about early in the book. And we see how the community around him eventually comes to his aid and to his support and gives him, you know, the nurturing and the attention that he needs to deal with it because there's a lot of history tied to that.

[00:34:07] **Kendra** And I feel like most Y.A. books, the parents are pretty terrible in the majority of Y.A. books, which is unfortunate because if you want to be a good parent, like where are you supposed to go to find examples of good parents or to have those conversations with your kids? So I love that . . . I think all of the family members in this book are supportive in one way or another, even if they have, you know, maybe if they're not a Muslim family member or they're a more liberal type of Muslim in the book, they are still very supportive of these two teenagers and their choice to pursue dating and marriage this way. And I think that's so important, especially considering, you know, like you said, Zayneb's facing Islamophobia, and Adam has M.S. And he's trying to navigate being newly diagnosed with that. And his disease hasn't gone into remission yet. So he still needs to see the doctor, but he doesn't want to tell his dad. So he's not going and getting the care he needs. And it's very complicated. Poor soul. My heart goes out to him.

[00:35:09] **Sumaiyya** I know. He's such a wonderful character. And, you know, I completely agree with what you said because I feel like a lot of times what happens in the Muslim community is that kids like Adam and Zayneb, who are young, who are obviously still either at university or in that age. But they know what they want. They know who they are. And they know the kind of person they want to be with. And sometimes they find that person against all odds. They find the person that they would like to spend the rest of their lives with. Yet their community is sometimes not as supportive because, interestingly, parents think that you're too young to get married, like I'm saying in certain communities right now. And I like that this book gives that representation where you have family that's supportive because this is the kind of story that a lot of young kids need where they're seeing that okay, if I realize that this is good for me, I'm going to have family who's supporting me. Like it's a possibility. It's not entirely . . . it's not an impossibility, basically. And I really liked that in this book.

[00:36:11] **Kendra** We've touched on this a little bit. But one of the things that I loved about this book is that . . . how it portrays Adam having M.S. and having his, you know, severe chronic illness. So M.S. is a type of condition that can go into remission. And so you are asymptomatic, but you can always relapse. And it's really difficult for him because his mom died of M.S. And so that's why he didn't want to tell his dad when he was diagnosed at university. And so when he went home . . . he left university and went home and is trying to figure out like how to talk to his dad about this because . . . does he really want to be the person that tells his dad that, you know, once again, he has this? And his dad will have to, you know, help a family member that has that.

[00:36:57] **Kendra** And there is a deep kind of emotional connection to a disease in families that have experienced that kind of trauma. It's like it's its own entity looming over you. And so the fact that this kind of almost like villain has returned to their lives is a huge deal, a huge emotional deal. And so Adam's little sister is also there. And she doesn't really remember her mom. And, you know, there's a lot of complications there that Adam also has to navigate on top of meeting Zayneb. And his big thing is that he thinks his life is over because he has M.S. And that is unfortunate because that is internalized ableism that

he's experiencing. And so he has to eventually accept that he is worth . . . that he has value as someone with a chronic illness, and he is worthy of love. Like he should accept that. And that's a huge journey that I think is especially difficult for men who have chronic illnesses because we have a lot of hang-ups about men who have illnesses. We "expect" women to have illnesses. But when a man gets it, it's like he's less manly or something. I don't know.

[00:38:07] **Sumaiyya** It's toxic masculinity again. Toxic masculinity is something that also affects, you know. . . . Definitely that's a thing. And with Adam, it's like he thinks that, you know, telling his dad is going to retraumatize his family because they've lost, you know, his mom to M.S. And he doesn't want to make them go through that again. But as we see with this book, family is there to support you no matter what happens. And it's something that he has to learn. Again, like you said, you know, he thinks that he is beyond love in a way because he is, you know, not going to be in . . . maybe he thinks that he is not fit for it anymore. And at the start of the book, we see how there used to be someone that he was interested in. And he's almost relieved that that person found someone else. And, you know, that's where his state of mind is when he meets Zayneb.

[00:38:56] **Sumaiyya** And with both of them, I think it's really interesting that they are . . . they're an interesting pairing because they're both individuals who are faced with challenges and are struggling internally. With Zayneb, we see that she wears a hijab, so she is hyper-aware of Islamophobia and the micro-aggressions. And that has kind of filled her with this righteous anger. So along with her friends, she is very active in fighting those corrupt elements in their life. And you know, Adam, as someone who loves his family and is sensitive, he wants to maintain a sense of harmony in the family. So they're both individuals who are dealing with really intense issues. And yeah, it's really interesting to see that with teenagers who have these complex things going on in their life, but they still end up finding each other and finding love.

[00:39:43] **Kendra** Another important thing about Adam's family is that his father converted to Islam, I believe, after his mother died. And he didn't ask his children to convert. Adam converted on his own after he saw the change in his dad, and he wanted to be part of that. And so, like we talked about with A PURE HEART, there's a lot of stigma around converts. And so seeing how Zayneb and her family just accept Adam and his family, which is as it should be, is really a great example of the inclusivity that should exist in Islam. But as you mentioned, some people still have hang-ups about, unfortunately. And so that was really good to see, to see converts and they are just fully Muslim as Zainab and her family. And I really appreciate that dynamic. It was very . . . it was pretty seamless, really.

[00:40:29] **Sumaiyya** Yeah. And to compare the two books, I would say about in A PURE HEART, you have more of the individual experience of faith. And in LOVE FROM A TO Z, we have more of a family experience of faith where you have Adam, his dad, and his sister, how they pray together, and they have this ritual regarding that prayer, the prayer ritual that they have. It's really beautiful to read about. And I think readers would really appreciate that, especially readers of faith.

[00:40:53] **Kendra** And so one of my favorite parts of this book is just how adorable Zayneb and Adam are. And I feel like a lot of people don't understand how romance and flirting can work in a like, you know, supervised or chaperoned situation. But I really like how ridiculous they are, and they don't take themselves too seriously.

[00:41:15] **Sumaiyya** Yeah, I think people should just watch a Jane Austen adaptation in film, and they'll see exactly the kind of tension that happens in Halal Dating. And that's what Adam and Zayneb are going through.

[00:41:28] **Kendra** So this section on 309, Zayneb is narrating. And she says, "I read him the parts that hurt [of her journal], the not angry parts, the part where these things felt confusing, like I would never ever figure out the world, a world that didn't seem to work because the moment you're feeling secure, someone hates on you. Like being happy on the plane headed over to Doha, and then a hateful woman shows up. Like coming to class to learn instead of being served hate. It makes you distrustful. 'Well, it makes me distrustful,' I said, closing my journal. He reached his right hand forward, and placed it on the teapot. 'I'm going to pretend this is your hand because I want to touch it. But I'm not gonna. Okay?' He drew his hand up a bit, then rested it again in the teapot, but lightly this time, almost hoveringly. 'How is your hand so hot?' I laughed, grateful for his corniness taking the edge off what was happening inside me." And you could see, like, you know, they don't take themselves too seriously. And they're just really corny and adorable. And I think that's just so pleasant to see. And it gives you all the warm and fuzzies, and I just love it. So.

[00:42:37] **Sumaiyya** They're adorable. And I feel like, as a Y.A., this book is also successful in the way that it shows the progression of their relationship and how they learn to accept each other and kind of learn to fit themselves together rather than, you know, there being some major misunderstanding moment, which is something we often see in Y.A. And that's . . . you know, it was really beautifully done. I love this scene.

[00:43:00] **Kendra** And that is LOVE FROM A TO Z by S. K. Ali. And what would your recommendations be for further reading, Sumaiyya?

[00:43:09] **Sumaiyya** So the first book that I actually have in mind for this is THE PLEASURE SEEKERS by Tishani Doshi. This was published by Bloomsbury. It's the story of an intercultural and interfaith marriage between an Indian man and a British woman. So it looks at their relationship as it moves from Britain to India and also how it impacts their children and their identities. And what about you? What's the first book that you would select as further reading?

[00:43:34] **Kendra** Well, I've chosen a book by S. J. Sindu, who is a gender queer author, but they are writing about a lesbian woman in this story. And this is A MARRIAGE OF A THOUSAND LIES, which is about a couple who are both gay, but they're in a marriage of convenience. And so when our protagonist—when she goes home to help take care of her grandmother—she finds out that her best friend and former girlfriend is getting married. So they start their relationship back up, and it's very complicated. And it really looks at what life is like for her being a Sri Lankan woman trying to fulfill these traditional values, but also, you know, being gay and having to choose between her very important Sri Lankan identity and her identity within a family and her queer identity and what that looks like. And I think this is such a very important book in this context. And so when S.J. Sindu sent us the book, I was just . . . I don't know why it took me so long to read it. First off, they sent it to us a few years ago. But I absolutely love this book. And it's one of my favorite books of the year that I have read so far. And I definitely want to recommend it because while it is written by gender queer author, it is about a lesbian woman, and I thought it was very fitting for our conversation.

[00:44:51] **Sumaiyya** Yeah, I actually read it after you talked about it last time we recorded our first episode for this theme. And, wow, it's definitely an intense, emotionally fraught novel. And one of the things I actually really loved about it is how we look at how lucky is someone who has to be more performative with her marriage than her husband has to be. And that imbalance, despite both of them being gay, is something that I found very interesting in the way that it was portrayed. Also her struggles with the way that she dresses up and the performance of it in general, it was very well done.

[00:45:26] **Kendra** And you had a second one, which I also because I . . .

[00:45:29] **Sumaiyya** So the second book on my mind is STAY WITH ME by Ayobami Adebayo. This was published by Knopf in the US. This is an intense and dramatic story of marriage about a couple who are unable to conceive biologically. And as a result of that, they're facing a lot of pressure from their family and from the community to have a child, preferably a boy child. So it's . . . I would say this is sort of like a thriller because of all the twists and moments of shock and disbelief that occurs throughout the story. It's quite entertaining to read, but also like has, you know, important themes mixed in with that.

[00:46:08] **Kendra** Definitely. And we did a Q&A of her when the book first came out as well, so I'll link that in the show notes as well. And that's our show. And if you haven't yet, please leave us a review on your podcast app of choice. And thanks to all of you who have already done that. And many thanks to our patrons, particularly today, our patron of the day, Sophia Martins. Thank you so much. And thanks to all of 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.

[00:46:41] **Sumaiyya** Join us next time where Kendra and Sachi will be talking about books on May's theme, nonfiction titles by Asian American authors. In the meantime, you can find Reading Women on Instagram and Twitter (@thereadingwomen). Thanks for listening.