

## Ep. 101 | Reading Women Award Winners

[00:00:09] **Kendra** Hello, I'm Kendra Winchester, here with Sachi Argabright, Jaclyn Masters, and Sumaiyya Naseem. And this is Reading Women, a podcast inviting you to reclaim half the bookshelf by discussing books written by or about women. This is episode 101, where we are talking about the winners of the 2020 Reading Women Award.

[00:00:29] **Jaclyn** You can find a complete transcript and a list of all of the books mentioned today linked in our show notes. And don't forget to subscribe so you don't miss a single episode.

[00:00:39] **Kendra** Today, everyone, the magic is happening. All four co-hosts are on the line at the same time.

[00:00:50] **Sachi** Whoo!

[00:00:50] **Jaclyn** Yay!

[00:00:50] **Sachi** We are here.

[00:00:53] **Kendra** So until now, we've always used the editing magic to make it happen. But this is the first time we're actually all together on the same call, which is amazing. It's really cool to be together at one time.

[00:01:09] **Sachi** Absolutely. Love it.

[00:01:10] **Jaclyn** It's very welcoming, feeling like we're all in this same virtual room together, especially at the moment.

[00:01:16] **Kendra** So in our previous two episodes, we talked about our shortlists for nonfiction and fiction separately. And we had a great time sharing all of those. It's been a wonderful process this year to read so many amazing books in a dumpster fire of a year.

[00:01:34] **Sumaiyya** Yeah, books have brought us so much relief this year. And the lists that we have are incredible.

[00:01:41] **Kendra** All right. So today we are going to name the winners. But before we name the winners, we thought it would be good to go over all the books that were nominated for this year's award. So we'll start with nonfiction. So the books on our nonfiction shortlist are IN THE DREAM HOUSE by Carmen Maria Machado, out from Greywolf; WHITE TEARS BROWN SCARS by Ruby Hamad, out from Catapult; THE DRAGONS, THE GIANT, THE WOMEN by Wayetu Moore, out from Graywolf Press; CONDITIONAL CITIZENS by Laila Lalami, out from Pantheon; MINOR FEELINGS by Cathy Park Hong, out from One World; and THE UNDOCUMENTED AMERICANS by Karla Cornejo Villavicencio, out from One World.

[00:02:33] **Jaclyn** And the winner of the 2020 Nonfiction Award is IN THE DREAM HOUSE by Carmen Maria Machado, out from Greywolf.

[00:02:42] **Kendra** Whoo!

[00:02:43] **Sachi** Yaaay!

[00:02:43] **Sumaiyya** Yay!

[00:02:48] **Kendra** Well, this is very exciting. I think the moment that I started reading this book, I knew it was magic. Like you have that feeling, you know, that you get when you start reading a great book, and you're like, oh, this is going to be a great book.

[00:03:02] **Sachi** One hundred percent. I was pushed to read this because it started just popping up within our cohost chat that "Oo! This is going to be a good contender for the Reading Women Award." And so I picked it up. And I immediately felt the same way, just like, oh yeah, this is going to be a really strong contender for this year.

[00:03:25] **Sumaiyya** Yeah. And I listened to the book for the same reason as Sachi when, you know, it was being highlighted by everyone. And so I listened to the audio, which is narrated by the author herself. And she does such a beautiful job. And her voice, you know, the way that she tells the story . . . and it's incredible. And I was completely, you know, swept up into the narrative. Really, really incredible work.

[00:03:50] **Jaclyn** And I think because. . . . This is a book that I picked up when it first came out last year. And this was one of the first books that I put on my list of books that I wanted to put forward when we were talking about the award. And it's been such a standout memoir and just nonfiction title completely in my reading in the last twelve months.

[00:04:11] **Kendra** I love that you mention the audiobook, Sumaiyya, because I also listened to the audio. And because the structure is so innovative, and the way that she writes the story is so new. It's a very interesting take on the memoir. And the way that Carmen Maria Machado structures this book as a series of essays that make up this memoir, it just . . . her voice lends to the storytelling. And I just loved every minute of it.

[00:04:46] **Jaclyn** I think the structure. . . . It's interesting to consider the structure itself because that's something that I see popping up in so many discussions and interviews and reviews that people share about this book . . . because I think memoir is such an exciting genre for so many reasons at the moment. There's so many great books coming up. I think this just does something so incredibly different and really exciting. And there's pockets within it that do really exciting things. Like, using "Choose Your Own Adventure" as a format within it was really clever . . . things like that.

[00:05:15] **Sumaiyya** Yeah. And I read about that as well. And I think I missed out on that particular, you know, "Choose Your Own Adventure" type of narrative form that she's played with because I was listening entirely on audio. So I think that having a print copy would be really helpful while if you are listening to the book on audio. And you know, I love the way that she's just completely reinvented the form and the way that she focuses on the dream house from different perspectives. So it's like this kaleidoscopic view of the dream house. There's so many different genres within this one book. And that's really what makes it have such a wide scope and such a wide range in the way that she's addressing the issue.

[00:05:54] **Sachi** I feel like, too, it's really hard to describe. You know, I think we've mentioned multiple times on this episode and even in previous episodes about how different of a memoir and how special of a memoir this is. And I had heard previously from various people on Bookstagram and such that this is very different than any other memoir.

It's very, like, maybe "experimental" is the word that I've seen used. But I feel like I didn't really get it until I picked it up. So I think that's one of the greatest things about us highlighting it, um, highlighting and choosing it as the winner this year is that hopefully people will pick it up and see for themselves how incredibly special and different this is because I feel like it's something you need to experience to truly appreciate and understand.

[00:06:44] **Kendra** One of the things that I really love about this book is how, you know, this book is out from an indie press. You know, it's out in the world. And the way that Carmen Marie Machado shows her range in this book is incredible because each essay is structured a little differently in and of itself. And we talk a lot about structure. But typically when I think of a memoir, it's like, you know, beginning to end of the story. It's very linear. But the way that she writes it is like she's giving you all these pieces of the puzzle. And eventually you get to see the whole picture. And I think the way that that is consistent throughout the memoir is really an achievement. I mean, you see it at the end. Yeah, and it looks great. But the work that went in to get there, she makes it look easy, which means that she had to work really hard, you know, to put it together. And I think the way that she handles it---handles a very difficult topic of emotional and physical abuse within a relationship, within a queer relationship---it's just so well done. And it really deserves all the accolades.

[00:07:54] **Sumaiyya** Yeah. And, you know, the the wide range that she's referencing with all of the stories, the pop culture references and even the academy works, what she does is like she's creating this archive that is ultimately going to help people kind of make sense of this particular trauma and how it's been represented and dealt with in the past and how we can talk about it. So it's really contributing to that canon of understanding and investigating intimate partner violence in queer communities.

[00:08:28] **Jaelyn** I also really liked how this imagery of the house really translated in the language that she used within the individual parts. Like the language of component parts to a house, like the built environment parts. And maybe given my background, what I do for a job, I just found that a particularly exciting thing to see coming through in literature and in the very literal language that she's using to build the memoir.

[00:08:55] **Kendra** It's like she's furnishing the dream house. It's like she's giving you this picture because the each chapter is titled "The Dream House as \_\_\_\_." And so it's giving you this single idea of the dream house and then expanding on all the different things that that is. And I think when you're talking about a relationship like the one that she experienced, there is that first magical moments of the relationship. But then it's . . . you slowly begin to see things, often even before she does in that moment, you know, as readers. It's just really well done with all of its different pieces. And we keep talking about structure and how innovative it is. But I think really the experience really is like . . . you just have to read it, you know.

[00:09:40] **Sumaiyya** Yeah. I mean, you begin with this fairytale. And then, you know, with each part of the house, like all the different views of the house, kind of show you how with time and with the progress of the relationship, it's also like decomposing and becoming, you know, like worse than it used to be. So we're seeing that, you know, the movement of the dream house as well.

[00:10:03] **Kendra** One of the things that she captures is when you're in a relationship like that, you don't realize it in that moment. You don't really understand what that relationship

was until you're out of it. And then she also has these moments where, you know, she's thinking back on it and something will remind her of that abusive relationship. And it comes back. And I think that is something that a lot of . . . particularly women . . . have experienced in relationships like that . . . that you have that voice in your head of the person that you used to be in a relationship with and how that kind of haunts you. And that haunting is woven throughout the book as well, where you can see that this has deeply affected her in the way that she sees herself. And that's something that she has to work through. And I think this memoir is part of that.

[00:10:55] **Jaclyn** So, again, the winner is IN THE DREAM HOUSE by Carmen Maria Machado, out from Graywolf Press. And Sachi, did you want to talk us through the books that were on our fiction shortlist?

[00:11:06] **Sachi** Yes, I would love to. So before we announce the winner for our fiction category, our nominees are THE YIELD by Tara June Winch, and that's out from Harper Via; THE VANISHING HALF by Brit Bennett, and that's out from Riverhead; HOW MUCH OF THESE HILLS IS GOLD by C Pam Zhang, and this is also from Riverhead; EVEN AS WE BREATHE by Annette Saunooke Clapsaddle, and that's out from University of Kentucky Press; GIRL, WOMAN, OTHER by Bernardine Evaristo, and that's out from Grove Press; and AGAINST THE LOVELESS WORLD by Susan Abulhawa, out from Atria Books. So those are our nominees and I believe Sumaiyya will be announcing our winner.

[00:11:54] **Sumaiyya** So our winner for the fiction category this year is GIRL, WOMAN, OTHER by Bernardine Evaristo.

[00:12:03] **Sachi** Whoo!

[00:12:04] **Jaclyn** Yay!

[00:12:04] **Kendra** Very excited.

[00:12:07] **Jaclyn** So exciting.

[00:12:07] **Kendra** It's hard to cheer when you don't want to like blow out everyone's ears.

[00:12:10] **Sachi** I know. And I forgot to unmute myself for a second too. So, I was like, oh, gosh!

[00:12:18] **Kendra** I'm very, very excited about this book. And I understand, like, a lot of people are very excited about this book. But, you know, I was revisiting it, just prepping for this. And I was like, man, this book really is that good.

[00:12:38] **Sachi** Yeah, I read this one a while ago now, I feel. And so I did kind of skim through it before this episode. And it just . . . I don't . . . I can't even . . . we picked two winners where you can't even explain, like, how wonderful it is because it's so different than anything I . . . at least I've read before. And so similar to what I said about the previous winner, I think it's just like you got to read it for yourself to see how fantastic it is. And hopefully us highlighting it specifically as a winner will compel people, at least our listeners, to pick it up.

[00:13:15] **Sumaiyya** Yeah, and I read it very recently. And, you know, like, it took me a few chapters to get into it. But once I was in, I . . . you know . . . like, I just flew through it.

There's no stopping reading this book. And I didn't even realize when I'd read, like, over 450 pages. So it's really one of those books where once you're in, you know, you're completely captured by the narrative and the voices and just the scope and the beauty of this incredible novel.

[00:13:49] **Jaclyn** Something that I really liked about this was---similar to a nonfiction pick actually---I enjoyed reading it as an experience and from a narrative perspective. But I think structure was something that played so much of a part in why I loved it so much. I think it's just doing something so clever and so innovative. And it's something that I really hope to see more of in fiction writing.

[00:14:12] **Sumaiyya** Yeah, there's this fluidity, you know, in the form. It flows like poetry. You know, it's like a deep inhale sometimes. And what I really love is the way that that fluidity is also translating in the, you know, in the different themes in this book. So, like, we are seeing fluidity in the form and also sexuality, gender, and class . . . and also in the way that the lives of these different women are interconnected and flowing from one to the other. So that was really beautiful to experience.

[00:14:48] **Kendra** And I think that that fluidity that you mentioned, Sumaiyya, lends itself to the topic of the book, which is the fluidity of gender and identity and what it means to be a woman. And we've talked about how . . . Bernadine Evaristo has talked about womxn with an "x" because it extends what the idea of what it means to be a woman. We often view "are you a woman" as a yes-or-no question. But really, it's a bit more fluid than that. It's not really a box as much as it is like a just an area that, you know, like a Venn diagram. And some people, you know, identify as neither a man nor woman. Some people identify as both. There are lots of different ways that gender manifests itself. And I really appreciate that about this book is that each woman is different. Each person, I should say, is different because there is a non-binary character as well in here. And so I really appreciated that because it really leans into that idea of fluidity. And it's all throughout the whole book. And it's beautiful.

[00:15:54] **Jaclyn** Just picking up on this theme of fluidity that we're talking about. . . . One of the other things that I thought was really clever in this was the way that time and place was so fluid as well. Like this book covers a period of about a hundred years between all of the different perspectives that we're following. And the characters just keep overlapping. And there's so many points of connection between them. I thought that was something that was really well done as well.

[00:16:19] **Sumaiyya** Yeah. While I was reading this, I started looking forward to kind of piecing together how a particular character was related to another one. And so that mystery, and you know, that . . . another thing was kind of really exciting to experience as well. And just, you know, the range of voices that we have in this book and how she brings them to life, I think is a brilliant achievement in this book.

[00:16:43] **Sachi** Yeah. I was also going to mention---kind of piggybacking on what you what you said, Sumaiyya---just the the amount of variety and intersectionality and just the array of the voices that are featured in this book. If you're someone who loves books by or from multiple points of view or different perspectives, or if you like having different kind of PVS interconnecting and mingling with each other and kind of just really spacing out how each character is kind of related to one another, that type of thing. . . . I really like those types of books. And so on top of the really, you know, important and great conversation around gender fluidity and things like that, you also have just this---we are kind of revisiting

the structure again---this incredible structure that is so interwoven and features so many different voices, which I think makes the book very special.

[00:17:41] **Kendra** And I think that this book and the way that it features women, queer women of all different kinds, and particularly of Black women living in the UK. . . . These are such important stories to tell, but also been much needed for a long time. And, you know, we've talked a lot about this book this year amongst ourselves. And, you know, it was really disappointing to see that the first Black woman who won the Booker also had to share it with someone for weird reasons. And that was incredibly disappointing because this book is so good on its own and should have been seen and respected as that. Also here in America, I don't really see it places, you know? I don't see it out and about. It should be read and loved by so many people. And it deserves so much more attention here in particular. That's one of the reasons we wanted to feature it is because it's just that good, and it deserves all of the accolades. And it just really goes back to that. It's just that good. And we want to see more people find it and love it.

[00:18:49] **Jaclyn** And the great thing is Bernardine Evaristo has such a backlist that everyone can now go back and read. She's been writing for forty years, and this is sort of the first major award that has kind of put her on the literary landscape for a lot of people. There's people that are now finding her via this book and diving back into her backlist. But one of the things that I've seen her comment on a lot in interviews about the Booker is that this is such an inspiration for a lot of older women and older writers that are, you know, that have been working on books for years and maybe haven't found traction with an audience. Or, you know, she's not just the first Black woman to win the prize; she's the first Black British writer to win the prize. So there's a lot of things that this book does and represents that is just exciting to see.

[00:19:42] **Sumaiyya** Those were our thoughts on GIRL, WOMAN, OTHER by Bernardine Evaristo, which is published by Grove Press in the US. And it's our winner for the fiction category this year.

[00:19:54] **Kendra** Very excited about that. Tearing very much on the inside. This is also the fifth anniversary of the Reading Women Award which is mind blowing. I mean, we've had such great winners like PACHINKO by Min Jin Lee and HUNGER by Roxane Gay, CANTORAS by Carolina De Robertis and so many more. So to celebrate, we have something special.

[00:20:22] **Sachi** So we're really excited to announce that we have partnered with the Ideal Bookshelf by Jane Mount. And they will be selling some some prints and other merchandise featuring our five years of winners for both the fiction and nonfiction categories. So these can be available for purchase via the link in our bio and other places. We'll obviously be advertising this because it's very exciting. I think our team has seen some of the print or the examples of samples and things of the print. And I think we can all attest that they, you know, it looks gorgeous. I'm very, very excited about this. Jane Mount does an incredible job with her art. And hopefully everyone listening is very excited, as excited as we are, and will go out to the Ideal Bookshelf and purchase these.

[00:21:21] **Jaclyn** So we've already mentioned earlier in this episode that we are moving to an international theme for 2021. But yeah, that's something we're really excited to be doing, and it'll be in conjunction with our monthly themes that we have for the podcast episodes. And we're looking to bring you an even bigger range of books that we talk about

next year and books that are available in different markets. And hopefully that'll help us extend our reach of authors that we can profile and highlight for you.

[00:21:51] **Kendra** And we also have our Reading Women Challenge for 2021, which is out now, the time you were listening to this. And we will also be focusing on our international theme there as well, and so the prompts will be geared towards that and for our 2021 monthly themes as well. We're very excited to have all of this together. And 2021, hopefully, will be a very excellent year. I'm just thinking the bar is so low.

[00:22:25] **Jaclyn** It really can't be worse than 2020 was. Let's be real. I know. I don't want to jinx it because, like, really.

[00:22:36] **Sachi** If it is, I don't know if I'm going to be able to handle it.

[00:22:41] **Kendra** All right. So before we go, we have a few updates about the podcast.

[00:22:47] **Sumaiyya** This podcast started as two women sharing books with their friends. Now it has grown, and we have women volunteering their time from all around the world. As more women have contributed and shared their perspective, this podcast has become about so much more than gender. It's also about the intersections of identities such as race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, religion, and ability.

[00:23:14] **Kendra** So in that vein, we're changing our tagline from "Reclaim Half the Bookshelf" to just "Reclaim the Bookshelf." And for our 2021 theme, we're adding "Read the World." So we will have "Reclaim the Bookshelf. Read the World." And we think this better fits who we are now and how we have grown.

[00:23:33] **Jaclyn** And in the wake of transphobic comments from J.K. Rowling, it's important to state that trans women are women, nonbinary folx are nonbinary folx. Trans-exclusionary feminism is unacceptable. Reading Women stands with trans people, and we would never want our mission to be construed as excluding anyone.

[00:23:52] **Sachi** So in addition to changing our tagline and focusing on an international theme, this coming year we're also going to focus on featuring more trans authors, including books from other marginalized genders.

[00:24:04] **Kendra** I'm very excited about this. There are so many great things that we have planned for 2021. So I'm so excited for the season to start in January.

[00:24:15] **Sumaiyya** Yeah, I'm really looking forward to all of the books next year.

[00:24:19] **Jaclyn** Me too.

[00:24:20] **Kendra** But first, we have a well-deserved rest. We will have a break from . . . our typical break from the middle of December to roughly the middle of January. So make sure you're subscribed to our newsletter and following us on social media so you have the most updated information about our return dates, etc. Well, everyone, where can listeners find you all about the internet?

[00:24:44] **Sumaiyya** So I'm Sumaiyyya. And you can find me on Instagram (@sumaiyya.books) and on Twitter (@sumaiyyabooks).

[00:24:51] **Sachi** This is Sachi. You can find me on Instagram (@sachireads).

[00:24:56] **Jaclyn** This is Jaclyn. And you can find me on Instagram, Twitter, and BookTube (@sixminutesforme).

[00:25:03] **Kendra** And I'm Kendra. And you can find me (@kdwinchester).

[00:25:05] **Sachi** And that's our show. If you haven't yet, please leave us a review in your podcast app of choice. And thank you to all of you who've done so already. 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, please visit us at [readingwomenpodcast.com](http://readingwomenpodcast.com).

[00:25:30] **Sumaiyya** Join us next time in the New Year when we'll have new themes all centered around reading women around the world. In the meantime, you can find Reading Women on Instagram and Twitter (@thereadingwomen). Thank you so much for listening.