

Ep. 75 | Dualities

[00:00:09] **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 75, where we're talking about books around our theme dualities.

[00:00:23] **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.

[00:00:32] **Kendra** All right! So first up we have the news because we have three brand new contributors that we're very excited about! Joce from @Squibblesreads, and also she is a co-blogger at The Quiet Pond. We have RuthAnn of @definitelyRA from bookstagram and Bezi of @beingabookwyrn, also from bookstagram.

[00:00:52] **Sumaiyya** It's so exciting all the different perspectives that they're going to bring to the podcast. Super excited about it. I'm so happy to see them on the team. So yeah. Welcome to the team, everyone!

[00:01:03] **Kendra** We're very excited to have them on. And we look at our contributors sort of like correspondents in that they each have an area of literature that they focus on and read a lot of. So for example Bezi reads a lot of fantasy novels by Black women and looks at Afrofuturism and is even getting her masters degree writing about that topic. So she definitely knows what she's doing.

[00:01:26] **Sumaiyya** She's brilliant.

[00:01:28] **Kendra** And we'll be hearing from Bezi later on in the episode. She's going to be our guest. So you will get to know her a little bit more.

[00:01:36] **Sumaiyya** Yeah, I'm so excited to know what books she'll be talking about.

[00:01:39] **Kendra** But Sumaiyya, you have a special prize that you're going to share with us today as part of our news segment.

[00:01:45] **Sumaiyya** Yes! I wanted to highlight the JCB Prize for Literature, which is a new literary prize launched in India. So they recently announced their long list for 2019, and this is the second year that they're running. I actually found out about them when I came to India last year, and I'd never heard about them before. But that was the first year that they were doing it. So I've forgiven myself for that. It's definitely something that I feel the Indian literary community is super excited about because this prize highlights contemporary Indian writing and also pays a lot of attention to translated literature from regional Indian languages that have been translated into English. So it's a great way to make literature accessible and to highlight these amazing new books. And I think it's also amazing for the author because I think there's an award. It's somewhere around \$30,000, and that's a great gift that can ease a writer's life and give them more time and space hopefully to write more and share more of their thoughts with the world.

[00:02:46] **Kendra** Wow, that's fabulous. Yeah, obviously I love prizes, so I'm just very excited.

[00:02:51] **Sumaiyya** Yeah, I'm actually really looking forward to exploring the list, hopefully next month when I have more time.

[00:02:58] **Kendra** Yes. So here in the United States, we also have the National Book Award. And so the long list for that award were announced this week. There are several different categories, including fiction, nonfiction, poetry, translated literature (which is in its second year), and Young People's Literature (which include includes YA and middle reader).

[00:03:18] **Sumaiyya** That's a diverse range of books.

[00:03:19] **Kendra** Yeah, definitely! And so you have all these different categories, and each day this week they announced a different long list etc, etc. But Sumaiyya, what are your initial thoughts on all of these long lists?

[00:03:32] **Sumaiyya** Yes. So I was really intrigued by the long list. I've sort of been following some of the behind-the-scenes by someone who works there. And obviously they didn't reveal anything on their Twitter, but I've been interested from afar. And I was really happy to see *THE OTHER AMERICANS* by Laila Lalami on the list because I adore her work, and I really enjoyed this book, and I think her work deserves more attention. So it's really, really a great thing to see it on here. So another book that I was really happy to see on long list, on the translated literature long list, was *CROSSING* by Pajtim Statovci, an incredible book and definitely one of those that made me cry. So I'm really happy that more people are going to be reading it because I haven't seen it on bookstagram that much. I have *THE MEMORY POLICE* by Yoko Ogawa on my reading list. So I'm actually going to be reading that next week. And it's great to see that on the list as well. Now I can see that I've at least read a few of the books here.

[00:04:31] **Kendra** Yeah, I feel like the translated long list is actually my favorite. I also love seeing Olga Tokarczuk on there. That's translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones. Now Jennifer Croft translated *FLIGHTS*, which won the Man Booker International Prize back when it came out. But I have heard from friends from Poland that *DRIVE YOUR PLOW OVER THE BONES OF THE DEAD* is actually a better novel. So I'm very excited to read it, even if it is a different author/translator team. So that is the National Book Award long lists. We will have the finalists. Their shortlist announces on October 8. The winner will be announced on November 20th. So lots of great things happening.

[00:05:13] **Sumaiyya** That is so exciting. A great year. So Kendra, this month we're discussing the theme of dualities. And this is where we talk about books by women that explore cross-cultural experiences, I think it would be the right thing to say. The easiest narrative to fit into this category would definitely be the immigrant story, particularly if it explores identity conflicts. And my own personal experience actually, you know, as an expatriate inspired me to come up with this theme. But we've been talking about this for a while, and I think after the initial discussion to do the theme of dualities, it has developed into something that covers a lot more. And so we have included books that look at cross-cultural experiences and dialogue in general. It's the meeting of cultures that we're excited about, I think, because that breaks down ethnocentric tendencies in humans. So yeah, our hope for this theme is to look at stories that explore how individuals and societies are faced with multiple influences and also narratives that break down stereotypes.

[00:06:17] **Kendra** So yeah, so we're going to be talking about books around this theme. And so we have four from us today and then two from our guest. So my first pick is

OTHER WORDS FOR HOME by Jasmine Warga, and this is a middle reader poetry novel. And this is about a young Syrian girl named Jude. And she moves with her pregnant mom to the United States to live with her uncle and his wife. So then she goes to school there, and it's her experience being from Syria and essentially fleeing the country. But because there is so much upheaval there, and there's a civil war going on, and she moves over. And I know of several parents who've actually used this middle reader novel to explain why Syrian refugees were relocating in their town, which is a really cool idea because you can then teach your child about why people leave their own country and what it's like to immigrate to United States and be a refugee. And I think it's just a gorgeous middle reader novel. It is definitely one the best ones I've read this year.

[00:07:17] **Sumaiyya** I think it's so great that parents are exposing their children to books that make them more sensitive towards the experiences of other kids who are going through, you know, often times worse situations. And one thing that I truly loved about this book is how the supporting characters around our protagonist told her that you don't have to choose between Syria and America. You can belong to both. And I think that value of being from two places is something that definitely hit home, regarding our theme. That's definitely something that is very close to the theme that we're talking about here.

[00:07:55] **Kendra** Definitely. And there's this moment in the book when you have Jude talking to her uncle, and she's asking him what it's like to be of two places. And he's the one that tells her it's okay to be from both. And I think that's such an important moment because we often see stories or narratives where immigrants have to choose one or the other, but really they're from both places, and that is beautiful, and that's fine. They don't have to choose. And this book, I think, really looks at what it's like to be also an immigrant at different stages in your life because while Jude moves when she's in middle school, she meets a girl who was born in America, but her parents were immigrants. And it looks at just what that difference looks like of understanding your own culture or your different cultures and how that dynamic works with a person and how they emotionally work through that, which was a great thing to see that different types of immigrants have different struggles that they have to work through.

[00:08:59] **Sumaiyya** Yeah, and one of the things that I liked about this was how Jude's arrival in America, along with her mother actually, helps her Uncle reconnect with his own identity as a Syrian, something that he had slowly like let go of almost, it seems. So that presence, you know, her presence really affects him as well, and he develops himself in a way that is really tender because you have this young girl who's teaching almost an older man how to be himself, and that's beautiful. One of the other things that really touched me about this book is how Jude has this class for English that she goes to, and she meets these other kids who are also in a similar situation, and how that sort of becomes like a second home for her. And seeing them move together in this experience was also beautiful because I think it shows how being someone new in a very different place can be rough, but you're not alone.

[00:10:02] **Kendra** I feel like you also have a lot of things like food plays a big part on how Jude experiences her culture. And food and how sharing that kind of food with her uncle, who hasn't eaten legit Syrian food for a long time. And there's this one moment where she finds this one restaurant, and she sits in, and she's like, It smells like home. And I was just like, oh my goodness, you're killing me. Like it's such a beautiful moment. And it's like that throughout the entire book. So obviously we really love this book.

[00:10:36] **Sumaiyya** Definitely. And you know I actually had a similar moment when I was in Kuala Lumpur recently, and I went to a Middle Eastern restaurant. And it was exactly like home, and I was like, Wow, this reminds me of home. And when I read that in the book, I was like, I know what she's going through right now. I relate to that. I've been through that exact same moment. It's it's an incredible book, and I really hope more people, regardless of what their ages, will be reading it.

[00:11:02] **Kendra** So that is OTHER WORDS FOR HOME by Jasmine Warga. And Sumaiyya, you have our next pick.

[00:11:07] **Sumaiyya** So the first book that I am talking about is THE PACT WE MADE by Layla AlAmmar. She is a Kuwaiti author. This book was published by HarperCollins in the UK, and it's available on Book Depository and Kindle. THE PACT WE MADE is a novel set in Kuwait. But before I go into the details of all that I just wanted to say that I adored the experience of reading this book. I think AlAmmar does a great job of capturing what it's like to live in a cosmopolitan khaleeji city. By khaleeji, I mean a city in the Gulf region. I could totally picture the characters as people that I would actually have met back home in Jeddah, and that is something that I don't always get to enjoy while reading books. So this book means a lot to me personally. Anyway now that I have that out of the way. So this story looks at Dalia's journey as a woman who was attacked and sexually abused at a young age. And this has obviously caused a lot of trauma that is difficult to live with. By the way, this was not a spoiler. The details of it are revealed gradually in the narrative and ask for trigger warnings. I think it's not very graphic, but of course go in with caution if you would have an issue. Dalia is dealing with trauma, and she is a 29-year-old working woman living with her parents because that is how it often works in the Middle East and South Asia. So a woman goes from her parents house to her husband's house, and that's the kind of ideal that Dalia is trying to resist. I think the resistance stems from the fact that she has many sides to her, and she feels isolated from the society. Her trauma has sort of forced her to step back from the role that is expected of her, which is that of a young woman who should be eager to get married and settle down. So I was personally intrigued by the struggles that Dalia goes through. Within her own life, she is trying to cope with past trauma, and she's also experiencing the societal pressure to get married. That's a very difficult combination to go through. Oh, she's also an artist who hasn't fully uncovered her potential, but her art is a weapon against patriarchy and pressures that she faces. Aside from this, we look at the space around Dalia and the places that she occupies, the social realities that she moves through. So first there's the most obvious patriarchal space at home and the country in general, but you also have newer spaces that feel safer for her where she can be herself more. It's interesting to me that the same city that houses people who tell her that she's getting old and needs to get married also has this thriving art scene that offers her an outlet to express herself, to express who she is, and she has people supporting her by her side. And I think that's very interesting that places that are toxic for us can also offer a spaces that heal us. But it's not always sustainable. And this is definitely the case for Dalia. So as she journeys in the story, she is forced to choose between her family life (which means being dependent on patriarchal structures) or opting for freedom (which isn't going to come easy because the path obviously has been made so difficult for her). When I was reading this book, I felt like there was a sense of being torn between home and freedom, which is a very difficult combination. And I related to that because I grew up in Saudi Arabia, a country that has deeply troubled me and my sense of self. But it is also the place I would return to because I feel it has certain elements that are healing for me. And I mean this literally in terms of the physical spaces where I found comfort, whether it's going to Mecca to pray or the places that I frequented by myself or with my friends that brought me inner peace or simply you know my friends, the people

who I love who live there. No place, no person is entirely good or evil. Binaries like that don't really exist. And that's something I wanted to explore with this team of dualities, and I found it in this book, and I was so so happy when I did because I feel like we have Dalia, and we have Kuwait. Both are deeply divided, and that complicates things in the story.

[00:15:12] **Kendra** I think that's definitely a spot-on type theme for this book is dualities. It's almost like the two were made for each other because there's this single thing that is in itself divided throughout the book. So it sounds fabulous. I'm so glad it's available on Book Depository because, I mean, obviously I need this book. There's a need.

[00:15:35] **Sumaiyya** Yeah, it's incredible. And it reads beautifully. One of the things about this book that I actually haven't mentioned is the way that Layla writes about art is amazing. It's incredible. It's so deep. It's so pure. And it really goes straight to your heart, especially if you have a lot of things that you're dealing with internally. And the way that Dalia transfers that to art, and the way that art explains it to her is amazing. So I would definitely recommend reading this, especially if you're looking for more books that are feminist in nature from the Middle East. So that was THE PACT WE MADE by Layla AlAmmar. So Kendra, what book are you going to talk about next? And I believe this one will be your discussion pick!

[00:16:21] **Kendra** Yes! I am very excited for OUR WOMEN ON THE GROUND: ESSAYS BY ARAB WOMEN REPORTING FROM THE ARAB WORLD. And I don't remember where I first saw this book. I really don't, but I'm so glad I did. I haven't seen it very much on bookstagram. And we talked a lot about this while we were discussing this, but why is it not in more places? And the reason we love this book, one of the many reasons we love this book, is because it features so many different Arab women journalists doing the thing and going off into these really dangerous situations and reporting from the Arab world from the perspective of a woman. And some of the pieces are translated from Arabic. Most of them I would say are written in English. But there's just a wide range of types of women represented, countries represented. There's just so many things in this book, and so that is why it's one of our discussion of picks. It's because we can't shut up about it, really.

[00:17:17] **Sumaiyya** Yeah. And I love that you have all these different women who are covering different aspects of journalism, so you don't have just the writers. You have photojournalists included as well.

[00:17:27] **Kendra** There's this one essay we're going to talk about next time called "Just Stop." And it has photos included that she took to accompany her essay, and it was, oh my goodness, she did such an amazing job. And I think a lot of times here in the West, we don't realize how many stereotypes and different things that we have until we're directly confronted with those, and we realize that, Oh. That's, that's not true; that's just the stereotype of say, in this example that we have of Arab women, that they're not doing anything. But in reality Arab women are doing so many amazing things. And one of the things that's noted in this collection is that Arab women can go into spaces that men can't.

[00:18:06] **Sumaiyya** Yes.

[00:18:07] **Kendra** And just by that, they have this opportunity to report from there, and there's an entire essay about being a woman and going into these women-dominated spaces and gathering news from there. And when you have a war and a lot of the men are killed, you have a lot of women who are basically running the country and running everyday lives and keeping their families together. And I think it's just so important for us to

acknowledge and understand that women are doing great jobs everywhere, and especially with this book, Arab women reporting in the Arab world. They're just so amazing. Every essay, I just was like, this woman is incredibly brave and just incredibly courageous just to go and do her job. And there's so many stories of women and what they've lost to do their job. This is definitely something that more people should read.

[00:18:59] **Sumaiyya** Definitely, because it highlights so many things about how difficult it can be, you know, for these women. And they're still doing it. They're so resilient, regardless of whether they're journalists or the women on the on the ground who are actually surviving and helping others survive. And one of the things I feel is really unfair, and that's related to the stereotype that exists about Arab women or women in the Middle East in general, who are living in conflict zones is that they're being oppressed and they're not doing anything. And I think that's unfair because they have a different kind of reality, and they're navigating that reality in a different way. And I feel like Western feminists need to understand that it's their reality, and they have to navigate it at their own pace and deal with it in their own way. And this collection of essays definitely shows you that, that women are not just sitting in a corner, not doing anything, or just being told what to do. They're actually the ones, a lot of times, who are making the important calls. They're the ones who are doing a lot of the things that help people survive and that helps life go on.

[00:20:02] **Kendra** Yeah. And obviously it goes perfect with our theme this month. So we'll be talking about OUR WOMEN ON THE GROUND next time. So stay tuned for that discussion episode. That is OUR WOMEN ON THE GROUND: ESSAYS BY ARAB WOMEN REPORTING FROM THE ARAB WORLD, edited by Zahra Hankir.

[00:20:22] **Kendra** And we'll be back with more of this episode of Reading Women after a word from our sponsor.

[00:21:36] **Kendra** So Sumaiyya, you have our second discussion pick.

[00:21:39] **Sumaiyya** Yes. So my discussion pick for our theme of dualities is THE SLEEPWALKER'S GUIDE TO DANCING by Mira Jacob. This was published by Random House in the US and Bloomsbury in the UK, so you can find it in print, digital, and audiobook editions. I adored this book so much. It was a beautiful book to read. It was an incredible story of family. So this is where an Indian American family has created a home, and they're dealing with a difficult past. And new disasters are facing them. We have some really interesting characters in this book, and I think my favorite is Kamala, the mother. She is a character.

[00:22:17] **Kendra** She is.

[00:22:18] **Sumaiyya** She is so incredible. I love her. Like, I love that she exists somewhere in literature. So we experience the story mostly through the perspective of Amina, a photographer who is facing a career crisis. And she returns home because her mother, Kamala, that tells her that there might be something wrong with her dad. So her dad is named Thomas, and this is one of the things I loved about this family is their names actually represent different religions. You have Kamala, which is I think is a very Hindu name. And then you have Amina, which is a Muslim name. And then Thomas, I would associate with Christianity. Right? So in this book, we see Amina as she is pulled away from her career, and she returns to her childhood home because her mom calls her. And now she is with her parents, and this results in a surge of memories and past events that she hasn't fully coped with. And I think none of the members of the family have really dealt

with it. So one thing that I adored about this book is the pacing. It makes you feel like you're living each day with the character, like you're experiencing each moment, each emotion with them. And there's also like this movement within the narrative that takes us back and forth in time. So I felt like that performed the function of memory the way that our own memory sometimes works. And you know the way that it pulls at us.

[00:23:46] **Kendra** And I totally agree about the pacing. I was about 50 pages away, and I messaged you. And I like, this book is so good. There's only 50 pages left. It's a 500 page novel. I was like that is not enough. We need more pages.

[00:24:03] **Sumaiyya** Right. And I think you read it really quickly like within a couple of days or something. That's incredible.

[00:24:06] **Kendra** Yeah.

[00:24:06] **Sumaiyya** So you rushed through it. That's amazing because it is that kind of book. I read it twice in one month by the way.

[00:24:16] **Kendra** Oh my goodness.

[00:24:16] **Sumaiyya** It's a 500 page book. In case you guys are wondering why Sumaiyya has not been reviewing books recently, it's because she spent a lot of time reading the same book.

[00:24:27] **Kendra** Well, Mira Jacob reads the audiobook, and she does a great job with all of the different characters. And her voice that she does, the accent that she does for her for Kamala, is the best because Kamala has the best lines in the whole book. And she's such a character. She's like everyone's mom, you know. And trying to get her daughter married all the time and worrying about feeding people. Like the way that she hovers and is very much a part of her children's lives, you can see them trying to keep stuff from her so she won't be so nosy, but they fail miserably because she's a mom, and she knows these things.

[00:25:09] **Sumaiyya** Yeah. But like my favorite thing about Kamala is the way that she creates her own truth.

[00:25:14] **Kendra** Yep, that's so true.

[00:25:17] **Sumaiyya** I love that. For example, like when she's watched a film, she doesn't accept the ending that has been given by the writers. She thinks beyond it. And she's like, okay, yes, at the end, they got together. But five years later, they're going to get divorced.

[00:25:34] **Kendra** Oh my word. It was hilarious. And there's just stuff like that throughout the whole book. And I felt very much like I did when I write *A PLACE FOR US* or *THE NAMESAKE*, where you feel like you're part of the family. You feel like you're an invisible member who is also part of these characters' daily lives. And that is just a beautiful, very difficult thing to create when you have a book like this about a family. And I loved every second of it. I mean I loved *GOOD TALK* by Mira Jacob, which is her memoir that just came out. But I'd never read her fiction before. And oh my goodness, I hope she has another book, another fiction book out.

[00:26:12] **Sumaiyya** Yeah, definitely. And I feel like the way that she writes, she creates this wholesome quality to the narrative. It doesn't just look at one character. It's not one sided. You're getting so many perspectives. And in general, I felt the strength of that family unit. You know, how people grow together, how they grew apart, how there are different ways in which members of the same family deal with a problem. One other thing that I feel like we'll talk about in the next episode is how this is also not your typical immigrant family story. And it's actually quite different to the other books that I've read about Indian American immigrant experiences. So I love that you mentioned *A PLACE FOR US* because the family unit was also really strong in that book, and that's something you see in this one as well. And yeah, I'm so excited to talk about this book more. It has so much to offer. So that was *THE SLEEPWALKER'S GUIDE TO DANCING* by Mira Jacob.

[00:27:12] **Kendra** And now it's time for our guest spot. So if you're new here, welcome! Every month we have a guest come on the podcast and recommend two books on this month's theme. This month is our contributor Bezi. She is from Instagram. Her handle is @beingabookwyrm. And she is one of our new contributors! So give her a warm welcome. And without further ado, here is Bezi.

[00:27:33] **Bezi** My name is Bezi Yohannes. I am bookstagrammer, under the handle @beingabookwyrm. I focus on Black fantasy and Black speculative fiction. I also cover contemporary Black fiction and young adult fantasy, particularly with women of color and girls of color in protagonist roles. And I have just started as a contributor to Reading Women and focused on reviewing Black speculative fiction and Afrofuturism. The first book that I picked for this episode of the podcast is Maaza Mengiste's *BENEATH THE LION'S GAZE*. It is a story about the revolution in the '70s, in the early '70s in Ethiopia in which a number of students and socialist and communist leaders overthrew the monarchy and seized property from a lot of Ethiopia's wealthy elite, took over a lot of schools, and jailed people who were assumed to be associated with the monarchy and its ideals. And that extended not just to the wealthy elite but to a lot of middle-class Ethiopians, including the main characters of the story. Hailu, a prominent doctor, and his sons and his family are affected by the violence and the state-sanctioned torture that Hailu is basically asked to participate in and to condone. And so his family flees, and the story sort of follows them and the family's unraveling as they're forced to reconcile with what Ethiopia is becoming and became very quickly during this time. I chose to talk about *BENEATH THE LION'S GAZE* because I'm a first generation Ethiopian American. My parents came to the United States, fleeing the same revolution that she talks about in her novel. Of course she picks a fictional family. But in many ways, the story that she tells is reminiscent of and takes anecdotes from the stories of a lot of Ethiopians who came to America, to Canada, to even Europe, fleeing the revolution. There were various reasons why Ethiopians fled. Some of the more wealthy elite fled because their third lives were in danger, because their families were being killed and their property seized. And it is hard to relive through even this novel, even the distance of fiction, to relive the story that they've told me in some way. But it is important to think about the ways in which Ethiopia was and is such a proud country and proud of its heritage, proud of its church (which traces its origins separate from Western Catholicism and even Eastern Orthodoxy), proud of its monarchy. Emperor Haile Selassie, though in many ways corrupt, was part of a long lineage of emperors and the ideal that the monarchy was directly descended from King Solomon. Ethiopians are proud of that, and to reconcile that pride with the fact that so many of them had to leave—that my family is now here, and a lot of my family is here, and a lot of my family is still there—it's something that I'm still working my way through. And I think this novel helped me do that, and I think it would help other people to understand the complexity and the richness of Ethiopian history and its challenges that endure today, despite new national reforms. I

would recommend this book to anyone who truly wants to understand African countries beyond the sort of vague Western notion of Africa that you run up against a lot in American media. Of African children, and even the way that Ethiopia and Ethiopian poverty is depicted, if at all, is very sort of diminutive and condescending when there is obviously poverty in Ethiopia and a lot of it. But there's a lot of cultural richness. And again, to use the same word, complexity that the American media and Western media as a whole has never really been able to tap into because Ethiopia is one of the few African nations that was never colonized. And so a lot of Ethiopia's history was barred to the west. The West has not been able to access it, and so does not understand it. So this book is ideal for that audience. If you enjoyed, I would say, if you enjoyed other African authors, I'm thinking right now *A HOME GOING* by Yaa Gyasi, I think, is a similarly rich narrative. *BEHOLD THE DREAMERS* as well. In terms of thinking about the ways that African immigrants reconcile with, not just their history in the country but also in their country of origin, but their history in the country that is to come, that they are immigrating to. I think those books would be comparable in that way. And of course Maaza Mengiste has a new book coming out, *THE SHADOW KING*. And if you enjoy that book, and that's the first book that you read by her, then you should definitely read this book since it's on her backlist. And yeah I believe that this is a story truly for people who want to know more about the ways that African nations have been able to escape some of the frustrations of globalism and yet are still dealing with the repercussions of internal corruption and different cultural dynamics that have made some of these conversations start at a different point than they did other African nations and of course in the West.

[00:33:32] **Bezi** The second book that I've chosen to talk about today is *THE HUNDRED THOUSAND KINGDOMS* by N. K. Jemisin, who right now is famous for her multiple Hugo Award winning series, *The Broken Earth* trilogy. The book is about a young protagonist named Yeine, who is raised in this fantasy world that discusses a lot of issues about colorism and blackness within the sort of tropes of castles and royalty and internal conflict and betrayal within the royal court. Yeine is biracial or the equivalent of biracial in this fantasy world. She was raised by the Darre, which are the dark-skinned tribes in this fantasy world. But she is also part Arameri, which are the privileged and ruling class. And they are also light skinned. To Yeine's shock and dismay, she finds out that she's been summoned to her grandfather's castle in the clouds called Sky. The castle is the headquarters of the Arameri family, and she suspects that her grandfather had her mother murdered. But her grandfather has summoned her to name her as one of the potential heirs to his absolute power over all the kingdoms. Now as an outsider and a figure of suspicion to all potential communities, Yeine is now seen as too Arameri by the Darre, who raised her. And she's seen as too Darre and too rural for the upper class Arameri in the royal castle. Her situation becomes even more precarious when Yeine realizes that she shares her body with the soul of one of the gods, magically enslaved by this ruling elite. So in shaping Yeine's understanding of her identity, Jemisin builds this meticulous and entirely fantastic world that transcends really conventional Eurocentric tropes of fantasy and of epic fantasy and explores the ways in which Yeine is entitled to this rage and frustration and anger while also being a really complex and soft and kind character. I chose this book, and I had the idea of the duality theme, which I sort of touched on a little bit with *BENEATH THE LION'S GAZE* because I thought about the ways in which *BENEATH THE LION'S GAZE* deals with an obvious, or more obvious, duality—the idea of dual citizenship and dual loyalties to two different countries, the ways in which Ethiopian Americans in that first generation and the first wave in the 70s loved and had been raised in Ethiopia but were forced for various reasons to flee and come to America. And so for Jemisin, she was dealing with duality in a totally different way. She's dealing with duality in this biracial heritage, although it's fantastic biracial heritage. And she's dealing with duality in the sense

that Yeine is a character of duality. She holds within her, Yeine is possessed by a goddess who is the goddess of both brightness light and darkness. This goddess is associated both with two other god characters. One of them is the night lord, who is presumed to be the evil god. And one of them is the lord of light, who is presumed to be the good god. And the goddess that possesses Yeine is associated with both of them, has a whole mythology and a relationship with both of them. Without spoilers, this is a really complex relationship, and the way that it unfolds shows the fact that Yeine herself, in being possessed by this goddess but also by virtue of her personality, is a person who is dealing with very contradictory aspects of her nature. She is both soft and kind and thoughtful, but she's also very ambitious and angry and can be very rude and cruel even. And these aspects of her are depicted by Jemisin in equally sympathetic but honest ways, and so Yeine must reconcile her identity with the ideas and aspects of her nature that she wants to hold. She does not want to betray her sense of self, but she also doesn't understand how she can be both of these things, and she doesn't understand how the society can exist with these two very different tribes and the ways that the Arameri have oppressed the Darre. But then the ways that the Darre have also inflicted violence upon what is now the ruling elite. And she is trying to understand the society, and she's trying to understand herself to understand these contradictions. And Jemisin deals with them very honestly and meticulously so that the ending feels surprising but also very fulfilling in bringing together all of these different elements. I would recommend this book to anyone who really enjoyed Game of Thrones. Well, more particularly I would recommend it to the fans of BLACK LEOPARD, RED WOLF, which recently came out by Marlon James. I would recommend it to anyone who has enjoyed CHILDREN OF BLOOD AND BONE by Tomi Adeyemi. And I would recommend it to anyone who's a fan of fantasy and and Black fantasy and fantasy that centers women of color. These books both deal with the dualities, the frustrations, the complexities of cultural histories as Mengiste's book, BENEATH THE LION'S GAZE, deals with a very specific cultural history, a real history of Ethiopia. Maaza Mengiste's book is part of the Read Ethiopian Series that I am doing on my bookstagram under the hashtag #ReadEthiopian, in which I am encouraging as many bookstagrammers as there are to find books by Ethiopian authors, such as the ones that I suggest on my profile, and to read them and tag them such that the #ReadEthiopian hashtag grows because Ethiopian authors aren't really represented in a literary mainstream. And N. K. Jemisin's book also deals with the complexities and frustrations of cultural histories. It deals with that cultural history in a fantasy setting, but it is still similarly rich, similarly hard to understand the ways in which atrocities and kindness and love can exist at the same time of the horrors that are going on in both Jemisin's fantasy world and Ethiopia. Both are part of my identity, my Ethiopian heritage and my love for fantasy. And so these texts are books that really reached me at critical points in my life, and I hope that they can reach you in yours. And again, if you are interested in checking out other Ethiopian authors, I am doing the Read Ethiopian Series under the hashtag #ReadEthiopian. And you can check out all the other books that I featured for the week and other books that I will read later, hopefully, on other bookstagrammers' recommendations.

[00:41:09] **Sumaiyya** Thank you so much, Bezi, for telling us about these books. We can't wait to read them. And welcome to the team. It's so great to have you.

[00:41:17] **Kendra** And now it's time for the part of the podcast where we talk about what we are currently reading. So Sumaiyya, what are you reading now?

[00:41:23] **Sumaiyya** I'm reading THE CONFESSION by Jessie Burton. This actually came out a couple of days ago, but I've had the ARC copy for a while. And yeah. I'm kind of annoyed at myself for not starting it sooner because I think this might be her best

one yet. I don't know if you've read THE MUSE and THE MINIATURIST. Have you, Kendra?

[00:41:42] **Kendra** I read THE MUSE, but I haven't read THE MINIATURIST.

[00:41:44] **Sumaiyya** So THE MUSE is my favorite out of those two. But I think THE CONFESSION might take the top spot.

[00:41:50] **Kendra** Wow.

[00:41:52] **Sumaiyya** Okay, so this book basically looks at a young woman who has grown up without a mother, and she's obviously looking for that connection, and she wants to know more about who her mother was. And she does so by connecting to an author who used to know her mother intimately. So it's quite exciting because I really love it when books or authors are featured strongly in a narrative and something that the author, in this case Burton, has created entirely out of nothing. So it's like you have a story within a story. I love that.

[00:42:24] **Kendra** It sounds fabulous. You'll have to definitely let me know how it ends. How you like it, not obviously what happens. But your thoughts on the ending.

[00:42:33] I won't spoil it for you. So what are you reading?

[00:42:39] **Kendra** I'm reading I'M TELLING THE TRUTH BUT I'M LYING by Bassey Ikpi. It's out from Harper Perennial. I'm listening to the audio, which I found on Hoopla, so everyone go run off and find it. But she reads the audiobook, and I think that it adds such a layer of meaning when she's reading it because these are very personal essays about her struggle with mental health, some things that happened when she grew up. She's Nigerian American. And so being an immigrant and moving over to the United States and going to college and all these different things. And I'm finding I can't binge this essay collection. I have to read one and listen to one and then digest it. And I also have the print copy, so I can make notes or whatever I want to after I listen to them. But it's very much a process. I felt like it had so much depth to it. That's sort of like OUR WOMEN ON THE GROUND, which our listeners can't see but is like a rainbow of little flags. And I feel very much that Bossey's collection is very similar in that way. There's so much to learn and think about with each essay.

[00:43:43] **Sumaiyya** That sounds incredible. And this is actually the first time that I'm hearing about this book, which you know is amazing because I feel like I've said that about at least ten different books today. So there's so many books out there. What is life? How do we manage this?

[00:44:00] **Kendra** I know. We're just going to die next to our never-ending TBR.

[00:44:04] **Sumaiyya** Honestly. That even sounds ideal for some reason. It's so sadistic, but so true.

[00:44:09] **Kendra** That's it. That's our show. If you haven't already, please leave us a review in your podcast app of choice. This helps the algorithm gods to smile upon us so that more people can find the podcast. And thanks to all of you who have already reviewed us. Also, thanks to our patrons, whose support makes this podcast possible. They also make our transcripts possible, so please go check those out and share those with your

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[00:44:43] **Sumaiyya** Be sure to join us next time for a discussion about **THE SLEEPWALKER'S GUIDE TO DANCING** by Mira Jacob and **OUR WOMEN ON THE GROUND** edited by Zahra Hankir. In the meantime, you can find Reading Women on Instagram and Twitter (@theReadingWomen). You can find Kendra (@kdwinchester) and me (@sumaiyya.books). Thanks for listening to Reading Women.