

Ep. 80 | Most Anticipated Reads of 2020 Pt. 1

[00:00:09] **Kendra** Hello, I'm Kendra Winchester, here with Joce. 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 80, where we're talking about the most anticipated reads for the first half of 2020.

[00:00:25] **Joce** 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.

[00:00:34] **Kendra** Well, welcome, Joce. This is your first episode after becoming a contributor.

[00:00:38] **Joce** Whoo hoo!

[00:00:41] **Kendra** I mean, what an episode to come in on.

[00:00:45] **Joce** I know it's a big one. It's a big one. I'm ready, though. I'm ready.

[00:00:49] **Kendra** We were just talking about how picking just four each has been really difficult for this episode.

[00:00:57] **Joce** I know. Truly, truly Sophie's choice up in here.

[00:01:03] **Kendra** I was sitting and looking at my list and agonizing over what ones I wanted to pick. And I actually changed one like an hour before we started recording. So. But I feel good. I feel good. We have a great list.

[00:01:17] **Joce** I've changed mine so many times, I hardly know what's in it anymore.

[00:01:23] **Kendra** So before we jump into the books that we've picked today, I wanted to give everyone an update on this season of Reading Women. So we have so many new contributors like Joce, who have come on, so you'll see them popping up in different guest spots and just doing different things. So definitely check out all of them over on our website. I will put the link in the show notes for the team page, where you can go read about all the different team members. And also, this is a most-anticipated episode, and we will start back with our regular episodes in February when we're talking about Afrofuturism. That's pretty exciting. I'm excited for it. Bezi, who's writing about it for her master's thesis, is very excited about it too. And so, yeah, I'm thrilled. I've been reading so many things for it, and I cannot wait to share them with you.

[00:02:16] **Joce** So in 2020, there are some really big-name books that I am super excited about. One of them is by Emily St John Mandel. There is Louise Erdrich, who has such a huge repertoire of books, and I am so excited to see even something else from her. There's Elizabeth Acevedo, who wrote THE POET X and WITH THE FIRE ON HIGH, is also coming out with a new one. As well as Hilary Mantel. And one of my all time favorites, N. K. Jemison.

[00:02:44] **Kendra** I'm so here for that.

[00:02:45] **Joce** Yes, absolutely. But these are really big names. So we wanted to give more attention to some smaller names, maybe some debut novels. And so we will not be talking about these on the podcast today. And all of the covers will be featured on our website, if you guys want to have a look.

[00:03:02] **Kendra** So we are really excited about this list. And per usual, if you want even more new book releases, you can find those in the Reading Women newsletter. I put in, every other week, six to eight titles that I'm very excited about in that time frame. So you'll definitely want to go check that out. And of course, our newsletter subscription page is linked in our show notes. But Joce, I think you have the first pick today.

[00:03:27] **Joce** Oh, I do. Yes, absolutely. So this first pick is actually going to be coming out in a couple of weeks here. It's being published by Atria Books, and it's called *THE MAJESTIES* by Tiffany Tsao. And I am especially excited for this one because it's pitched as two of my favorite things in the world: *CRAZY RICH ASIANS*, but written by Gillian Flynn. I mean. . . .

[00:03:50] **Kendra** That is the perfect Joce combination, if there ever was one.

[00:03:53] **Joce** I know. Right. Like, it's literally my favorite. So the plot is basically about two sisters, Gwendolyn and Estella. And they are part of a Chinese Indonesian family. However, there has been this big massacre, and Gwendolyn is the sole survivor. But it turns out that Estella herself has poisoned and killed every single member of their extended family. I know. I was like, "Oh, this seems pretty benign. Oh, actually, Estella killed everyone. JK." But the story opens with Gwendolyn being awoken from a coma, and she is trying to comb through her memories for any possible motive for her sister to do this. And I think the part that reminds me personally of *CRAZY RICH ASIANS* is that it just has like a massive, kind of like, global scope. They go from Melbourne, Australia to California to Indonesia to Paris fashion Week . . . just jet-setting all over the place.

[00:04:47] **Kendra** This sounds absolutely amazing.

[00:04:50] **Joce** I know.

[00:04:50] **Kendra** And the cover is really memorable. But I had no idea what it's about. And now I'm like, I need to read this book now. Like, that's the only obvious solution.

[00:05:01] **Joce** I know. Absolutely. Yeah. It's got mystery. It's got some family stuff. And this cover is kind of, like, avant garde . . . kinda, you know, it's "arty".

[00:05:13] **Kendra** It's very eye catching.

[00:05:15] **Joce** Yeah, it totally is. And it's bright, and it's . . . she's stylish. Yeah. So that one is called *THE MAJESTIES* by Tiffany Tsao, and it comes out January the 21st from Atria.

[00:05:29] **Kendra** And I have the next pic, and I wanted to make sure to include an Appalachian pick because I'm Kendra. And so that just makes sense. And this one is *THE THIRD RAINBOW GIRL* by Emma Copley Eisenberg. And that's up from Hachette, also on January 21st. Now, this book is a little bit of everything. It's part true crime, part memoir, part history. But I think the main storyline really is Emma moving from New York City, where she's from, to Pocahontas County. And she's working there with an organization

that helps girls, teenage girls there, get extra tutoring help or maybe helps them write application letters to colleges. It just tries to give them a little leg up so that they can go and get an education and better themselves in that way.

[00:06:20] **Kendra** So she's working for that organization. And then she finds out about the Rainbow Girls, which were two women who were murdered in, I think, around 1980. And so she kind of parallels her own journey to Pocahontas County with these two women who came for this like big, hippie-ish kind of gathering that was happening in Pocahontas County. And you can really tell that she really fell in love with the area. And, you know, I'm always apprehensive when someone from New York City wants to write about West Virginia. Right? Like you, you get something that's typically not something that I would enjoy reading about Appalachia. But you can tell she really got it. She really did her research. She fell in love with the area. And this book is a little bit of everything. And by the end, I was totally obsessed and will definitely be rereading this book. It's the only book on this list I have finished, and I really loved it. And I think that she's a great way for people who aren't from Appalachia to kind of see into it a little bit and understand it a little bit better, which is something I think we also need in addition to own-voices stories. I think this is a great addition to Appalachian literature in that way.

[00:07:36] **Joce** Yeah, absolutely. And I think from reading reviews, early reviews, it looks like this is kind of super unique because it's true crime; it's memoir; and then she's also kind of reflecting on her experience as this helper person that these teenage girls have, which I think is really, really important. And she brings a totally different perspective being from a really big city. So I haven't read this, but I am stuck to do so.

[00:08:01] **Kendra** And it's really fascinating to see her talk about how she was just not happy living in a bigger city, and she was just searching for something. And so she leaves everything and goes and works in this location in the middle of nowhere, Pocahontas County, which is close to the border of Virginia and West Virginia. And she's also a queer woman. So it also looks at her relationships and how she's trying to figure out things for herself in that way, in relationship with both men and women. And she just weaves so many things into this book. And that's why I think some people are confused when people talk about it because it's so many different things at the same time.

[00:08:43] **Joce** Yeah, I think when I read this in the notes that we'd written down, I was like, "This sounds like a book that Kendra would pick and a book that Kendra would like."

[00:08:51] **Kendra** Well, you know, our friend Russell actually sent it to me months ago and was like, "This is a Kendra book. Here you go."

[00:08:57] **Joce** It's a Kendra book. Now two people have confirmed it. You're stuck. It's your brand.

[00:09:03] **Kendra** I'm here for it. So that is THE THIRD RAINBOW GIRL by Emma Copley Eisenberg. And that's out from Hachette on January 21st.

[00:09:11] **Joce** Cool. So my next pick comes out on February the 25th from One World Publications, and it's called MINOR FEELINGS by Cathy Park Hong. It's a nonfiction book. It's about the racial identity of Asians and Asian Americans. And it mostly focuses on how these cultures are not a monolith. So I'm Asian American, and it is the truth that there are a lot of media stereotypes. You know, Asian Americans are high achieving, cognitive, and academically focused group. But looking outside of these stereotypes that are depicted in

the media, Asians and Asian Americans are super diverse people, whether it's languages and dialects, ethnicities, skin tones, socioeconomic status. . . . I was reading in the blurb that she talked about including people who worked in factories versus tech millionaires and people who come from older money and also comparing and contrasting South Asia, East Asia, Southeast Asia. You know, just all these things I'm talking about, basically just speak to the fact that Asians and Asian Americans are not a monolith.

[00:10:19] **Kendra** Yeah, I saw this one because Mira Jacob recommended it to us on an interview. And then Sachi got a copy. And so I've heard nothing but absolutely stellar things about this book. And everyone is, you know, saying this is the book that you definitely need to read coming out in the first half of 2020. So I'm very excited for it.

[00:10:42] **Joce** I'm super excited about it because I feel like, you know, personally, as an Asian American person, there is a part of me that identifies as a woman of color, of course. But also, I know that in . . . I mean, I'm East Asian American. So in a lot of East Asian cultures, there are also a lot of things like anti-Black attitudes and model minorities. And I think Cathy Park Hong talks about this in her title, *MINOR FEELINGS*, because Asian American feelings are often depicted as, you know, minor or being diminished or, you know, subordinate or smaller than. And that totally contributes to the model minority status. And this kind of debunks all of that.

[00:11:24] **Kendra** You know, I can't think of a book very similar to this, and I feel like it's definitely been a long time in coming because like you said, it's not really been delved into how diverse the group that we call Asian American is. It's really a bunch of different people groups just in this giant umbrella term. And I think that this book is definitely going to dissect that and do, hopefully, a great job of that. And it just sounds amazing from every person talking about it. It sounds amazing.

[00:11:52] **Joce** Yes. So we say thank you to Sachi, our fellow contributor, for suggesting us this book. This comes out on February the 25th, and it is called *MINOR FEELINGS* by Cathy Park Hong.

[00:12:04] **Kendra** So the next pick that I wanted to share is . . . one of the most joyous people I've ever talks to is Leesa Cross-Smith. And she wrote *WHISKEY AND RIBBONS*. And she has a short story collection coming out called *SO WE CAN GLOW*. And that's out from Grand Central Publishing on March 10th. Now, like I've said, I'm very much obsessed with *WHISKEY AND RIBBONS*. It was one of the best audio books that I listened to the year it came out. And I really love her approach to storytelling. And she says she really just wants to look especially at black women characters in all of their different facets. And she also loves romance. And she kind of writes literary romance is what she calls it. And I would have to agree. I think it's a perfect blend of the two. So I'm so excited about these short stories.

[00:12:53] **Joce** Yeah, I was actually at work, and there's a bookstore right by my work, which is extremely dangerous, as dangerous as it sounds. And I was talking to the cashier, the woman who works there about *WHISKEY AND RIBBONS*, because I saw it. It had a new cover. It had a whole new design. And I was like, "Oh, I noticed that this book had a new design." And she was just gushing about how they were reading it in her book club. And there were just so many different opinions from people with different backgrounds. And it was such a good book club book. So if you guys are looking for kind of more backlisty, a couple of years ago, book club book, I would personally recommend

WHISKEY AND RIBBONS. And it is also endorsed by the bookseller at the bookstore near my work, "The Dangerous Place" we call it.

[00:13:37] **Kendra** I love WHISKEY AND RIBBONS so much. The publishing house that published it is up the road from where I live, and I am known as the person who loves WHISKEY AND RIBBONS. I have become that person.

[00:13:49] **Joce** You're that lady, Kendra.

[00:13:51] **Kendra** I am. I am. And so, she also got a novel deal with Grand Central. So there's a novel coming in 2021. And so, I'm just here for all things Leesa Cross-Smith. I mean, someone so joyous. Her Instagram is amazing. So I imagine that these short stories will hopefully be as uplifting and and enjoyable to read. And I'm assuming they have amazing character, just like WHISKEY AND RIBBONS. So I really love her writing style, and she's just doing the thing and being awesome at it. So I'm very thrilled for this. And I love how it's on so many lists and so many people are talking about it, which I feel like isn't as much of a thing with short story collections.

[00:14:34] **Joce** Yeah, I think there are very few short story collections that I recall, you know, people being like, "Oh my gosh, this is going to be the book of the year." And I think that's such a shame because not only is it like. . . . You know, each individual story is, you know, potentially really awesome. It's kind of like the makeup, the order that they come in. You know, what precedes and follows it. It's kind of like an album, you know. It's kind of like an experience. And I think short stories always get the short end of the stick. Short stories, short end . . . that was not intentionally, I promise.

[00:15:07] **Kendra** So, yes. So obviously, we're very thrilled for this book. And you'll definitely want to check out SO WE CAN GLOW by Leesa Cross-Smith. And that's coming out March 10th from Grand Central Publishing.

[00:15:19] **Joce** So my third pack comes out on March 3rd from Disney Freeform. And it's called WITCHES OF ASH AND RUIN by E Latimer. And this kind of has everything you could possibly want in a book. So it is fantasy, and it involves witches and ancient Celtic mythology. And our M.C. has somatic OCD and identifies as bisexual. And the book includes a romance with two girls. And one of my favorite parts of this book is that I was researching it on Goodreads, and there's a question and answer portion of Goodreads where the author sometimes goes in and answers questions. And someone asked E Latimer, "How gay is this book?" And her answer was, "The very professional and official answer to this question is 'Hella.' This book is hella gay." So, you know, I'm just . . . I'm here for all of this.

[00:16:13] **Joce** The plot basically revolves around our main character, Dana. She has just ended a relationship with her ex because her sexuality was outed in her conservative Irish town. And her absent mother also comes back into her life. Another part of her life revolves around her identity as a witch, and she wants to ascend to become a full witch. But another coven comes into town with black magic and premonitions of death. And the big plot point is that a witch turns up murdered with the sign of a serial killer who was supposed to have been long gone. So that just sounds like one big trip.

[00:16:50] **Kendra** Oh, my word. I literally have my hand over my mouth right now. Oh my goodness. I love creepy witch stories and Celtic mythology. Oh my goodness.

[00:17:03] **Joce** And mental health and a female/female romance. And a hella gay book. It's a hella gay book.

[00:17:10] **Kendra** How many Kendra books are there going to be out this year? Apparently a lot.

[00:17:16] **Joce** Are you gonna be the lady that is excited about this book that lives down the road from this one too?

[00:17:22] **Kendra** Yes. Yes, I am. I am going to be the person that just is like the number one fan club. Like, how Lupita loves Mira Jacob. That kind of number one fan club.

[00:17:37] **Joce** That kind of number one fan club. I also have to thank Rocky from *Blonde With A Book*. She told me about this book. She is all up and up on this kind of creepy, kind of, mental health mash up here going on. So thank you, Rocky, for recommending me this book.

[00:17:50] **Kendra** Bless her. Many thanks, Rocky.

[00:17:52] **Joce** Kendra says a big thank you to Rocky. She is now moving down the road.

[00:17:57] **Kendra** This is my new life now, and I'm very excited for it.

[00:18:02] **Joce** So this one is called *WITCHES OF ASH AND RUIN* by E Latimer. It comes out from Disney Freeform on March the 3rd.

[00:18:09] **Kendra** I think we must be getting like similar recommendations because my next book is *CONJURE WOMEN* by Afia Atakora. And this out from Random House on March 17th. And this is a debut novel. Now, this is part historical fiction, part magic-y stuff happening. The novel jumps back and forth between Rue in 1867 and her mother May Belle in 1857. And this is about these two slave women and how . . . well, the blurb says, "A dazzling novel about the intimate bonds of transgressions among people across racial divides and between a mother and her daughter with a shared talent for healing and the conjuring of curses." I immediately was like, Yes, I do need this book in my life. And if you see the cover, I remember it was at SIBA, which is the Southern Independent Booksellers Association trade show thing. And I was walking down the aisle, and I saw this book, and I cut people off. I walked across the aisle to the book, picked it up, and said, "Can I have this?" And whoever poor publicist I had pounced upon was like, "Uh, sure."

[00:19:28] **Joce** This is very dramatic. I am enjoying this recap.

[00:19:33] **Kendra** It was one of those books where you see the cover, and it is fabulous. And I read the back, and I was like, yes, this is a Kendra book. And I took it home and was very overjoyed because this book sounds and looks amazing.

[00:19:45] **Joce** Yeah, I'm actually looking at the cover right now. If I can describe it to you, the background is black. The text is white, but the font is great. And it's on this beautiful, floral background with this illustration of a woman. And it's really beautiful. I'm not doing any of this justice. I'm like, there are flowers. There's a woman. There's some words. I'm not doing this any justice. I should stop.

[00:20:11] **Kendra** I think it's also an illustration that if you turn it upside down, it's also right side up. So it's an a little illusion on a cover almost. It's kind of playing with your eyes. I'm sure an art historian is cringing in her shoes as she listens to this and us trying to describe this visual art. But again, it will be linked in our show notes so you can go check out the cover because they did a great job. Random House did a great job with the cover of this book. So I am so pleased Afia Atakora has CONJURE WOMEN coming out as her debut novel on March 17th.

[00:20:50] **Joce** My next pick is YOU EXIST TOO MUCH by Zaina Arafat. And it comes out from Catapult on June 9th. And it is Zaina Arafat's debut novel. The main character is a queer Palestinian American woman. And she has two defining, and I guess from the way that they're described, also traumatizing moments. The first of which, she's 12 years old, and she is in Bethlehem, where a group of men chastise her for exposing her legs outside the Church of Nativity in a biblical city. And the second one of these traumatizing moments is when she comes out to her mom is queer, and her mom simply says to her, "You exist too much." So I guess that's where the title of the novel comes from. And it follows this woman from when she was a teen into her adulthood, including her first girlfriend that she moves in with in New York. She also aspires to be a DJ and a writer. And eventually, somehow, she ends up entering a mental health treatment center.

[00:21:44] **Kendra** I am riveted already just by the description of this book. Like I need to know what happens next, which I mean, props to, you know, the summary.

[00:21:53] **Joce** I know. It really just kind of covers everything. And I think the thing that stood out to me the most is that it covers a queer woman and her being in this especially biblical city. And I'm guessing also from the blurb dealing with parts of religion, mental health, and how all of those things intersect. And as you know here on Reading Women, we we love intersectional identities of women. And this kind of includes all of that and. And mother/daughter relationships too. So. Yeah. It's going to be a lot, but it is not going to exist too much. Not to be cliché, but I think it'll be great.

[00:22:36] **Kendra** I haven't heard of this book until you put it on our list. I'm so glad that you found it and mentioned it because it's definitely a book I need to read. And Catapult always does a great job with their books as well.

[00:22:51] Catapult is A+. And yeah, I really like all the releases that they put out. So this one is coming out on June 9th. It is a debut novel by Zaina Arafat, and it is called YOU EXIST TOO MUCH.

[00:23:06] **Kendra** And the last pick we have for you today is one that I preordered literally as soon as possible. And that is WOW, NO THANK YOU by Samantha Irby. And this is out from Vintage on March 31st in the US, and in the UK it comes out on April 2nd from Faber and Faber. So the same week. Again, I'm not sure why America releases books on Tuesdays and the UK does on . . . what . . . Thursdays? I don't know. But they do. So anyway, I'm so excited for Samantha Irby because she is one of my absolute favorites. And if you don't know WE ARE NEVER MEETING IN REAL LIFE is one the most recommended books that I've ever recommended in my entire life.

[00:23:52] **Joce** Yeah, you should definitely read it. I mean, not not you. I know you've read it. The general "you." I had it for my very small stint as a book club host on Goodreads, and there was so much discussion around it. And I really loved it. And the audiobook, especially, is fantastic. So small segway.

[00:24:10] **Kendra** She reads the audiobook. And so these are humorous essays about her life. And she identifies as a fat, Black, queer woman. And she also has inflammatory bowel disease and arthritis and a lot of different autoimmune conditions. And so this book was one of the first books I'd ever seen a woman talk about bowel issues because which I also have as part of my disabling chronic illness. And so I felt seen for the first time in that way.

[00:24:41] **Kendra** But there are so many different parts of this book, and I actually recommended it to a book club leader, and she chose it. So everyone was reading it, and it was so great to hear all these different people from all different walks of life who related to different parts of these essays. I feel like there's something for everyone. But it's also so funny. From everything from *The Bachelor* to her demon-like cat Helen Keller to meeting her wife and getting married and also her dating life before that. And so this is her third essay collection. *MEATY* is the first one. And then *WE ARE NEVER MEETING IN REAL LIFE*. And then now this one follows her and her new wife as she's moved out of Chicago to this small town. I think the blurb says a tiny blue town in a red state or something like that. But I am very interested to see how Samantha Irby's life has changed and what that's like for her post-*WE ARE NEVER MEETING IN REAL LIFE*.

[00:25:39] **Joce** Yeah, I think having read, you know, all of her books, I think, you know, with any fiction author, you can kind of see growth or just a general trend in the way that they're writing. But this is especially interesting because these are nonfiction. You're literally kind of following her throughout her life. And, you know, even just going from *MEATY* to *WE ARE NEVER MEETING IN REAL LIFE*. I kind of felt like she was like my buddy, especially because she narrates the audiobooks, and I listen to them in the car. So it's kind of like, you know, I was I was driving with my friend Samantha. You know.

[00:26:08] **Kendra** This is also one of the only books that I tell people don't listen in public, or wherever, because if you randomly burst out laughing in a doctor's office. . . .

[00:26:20] **Joce** We're not responsible.

[00:26:22] **Kendra** Yeah, they'll give you some funny looks. So, yeah, a friend of mine recently told me like, "I don't know how anyone listens to this out loud" because she's like looking around, like, "Does anyone hear this essay that's being read to me?" Because some of them, you know, are more . . . they're adult essays. You know, talking about having sex with her wife for the first time, you know, it's definitely not something that you want to listen with children, but also really funny. And it'll make you look around to see if anyone knows what you're listening to. In all the best ways, mind you. So I will quit gushing about *WOW, NO THANK YOU* by Samantha Irby. And that's coming out on March 31st, from Vintage. And we did it! That's our eight.

[00:27:15] **Joce** Yay! We made it.

[00:27:16] **Kendra** We did. We did.

[00:27:18] **Joce** I can't believe are only eight.

[00:27:19] **Kendra** You know, we could have picked so many more.

[00:27:22] **Joce** I know. We really could have. We could have done eight in like January and February together.

[00:27:28] **Kendra** Well, if any of you want to check out those books, they will be linked in our show notes as well as if you want even more new books, you can check out our newsletter. Joce, as well as our other contributors write for it. So I always love seeing the books that they review. And I'm sure that you'll be reviewing some of these books in the newsletter that you've talked about.

[00:27:50] **Kendra** All right. So that's our show. If you haven't yet, please leave us a review in your podcast app of choice. That really does help the algorithm a lot to help other people find the podcast. And we appreciate all of you who have already done that. Many thanks to our patrons, whose support makes this podcast possible. We greatly appreciate them, especially that they enable us to make our transcripts for every episode. To subscribe to our newsletter or to learn more about becoming one of our patrons, you can visit us at readingwomenpodcast.com.

[00:28:24] **Joce** And also be sure to join us next time where Sachi, Bezi, and Kendra will be talking about Afrofuturism. And you can find me (@scribblesreads) and Kendra (@kdwinchester). In the meantime, you can find Reading Women on Instagram and on Twitter (@thereadingwomen). Thanks for listen to Reading Women today.