

## Ep. 97 | Beauty Privilege

[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. This is episode 97, or we're talking about beauty privilege.

[00:00:24] **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.

[00:00:34] **Kendra** So this is always where I have that Christmas carol of "It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year," but it's book award season.

[00:00:44] **Sumaiyya** Yeah.

[00:00:44] **Kendra** And that is the most wonderful time of the year. And I'm so excited because we have some ones we want to highlight today. And Sumaiyya, you have the first one.

[00:00:55] **Sumaiyya** Right. So in September, the JCB Prize for Literature announced their longlist. And I think we talked about this last year around the same time. So this prize was established in 2018 and has quickly become one of India's most prestigious literary prizes. And the books that are usually eligible for this are works of fiction by Indian writers that are published in English or translated to English. And as you know, India has so many languages and different types of literary cultures. So this longlist is definitely filled with a lot of different recommendations. And I was personally super happy to see Megha Majumdar's book on the longlist. And this month, I've kind of been, you know, working with JCB to promote Megha's book and, you know, just camping it and championing it on Bookstagram. So we did an Instagram Live last night. And it was so wonderful. I had the best time speaking to her. She was really easy to talk to, really kind, very generous with her insight, and just an incredible person overall. And in general, this year's JCB Prize for Literature longlist is actually dominated by women. So that's really wonderful to see.

[00:02:18] **Kendra** You also mentioned that DJINN PATROL ON THE PURPLE LINE by Deepa Anappara is on the list as well, which came out earlier this year. And it's a debut as well, which is pretty fabulous to see.

[00:02:30] **Sumaiyya** It's an incredible book. I also really loved that one. And we're actually finding out tomorrow who's going to be on the shortlist. So fingers. . . .

[00:02:39] **Kendra** Oh, exciting!

[00:02:39] **Sumaiyya** Fingers crossed. Yeah. I'm really hoping that both of these authors make it. I actually haven't read the other books yet, but these two are definitely my two favorites.

[00:02:48] **Kendra** We'll cross our fingers for them. And we'll make sure to include all that info and your live show in the show notes.

[00:02:56] **Sumaiyya** Thank you. So tell me about what's happening in your part of the world with regards to literary prizes.

[00:03:01] **Kendra** Right. So the National Book Award, which is America's big prize, has kicked off, which is very exciting. And I was so thrilled to see the longlists, and there's such a wide range of books on the longlist. So I'll just put the links down below. But that includes *A BURNING* by Megha Majumdar. Also Brit Bennett's *THE VANISHING HALF*. You also have *THE SECRET LIFE OF CHURCH LADIES* by Deesha Philyaw. And I'm so excited because this is out from West Virginia University Press, which is one of my favorite university presses. And I received this book earlier. There isn't an audiobook yet, so it's been sitting on my shelf. But I'm so excited to see a book from the South like this acknowledged and honored. And there's also the 5 Under 35 honorees. So these are nominated by other people who have been honored by the National Book Award. And so those people choose other people for this list. And so it's all women, and they're all women of color. And it is a fabulous list, including one of our favorites. . . .

[00:04:17] **Sumaiyya** Fatima Farheen Mirza. Yes. I was so happy to see her on that. Yes. So incredible. I'm so happy to see her.

[00:04:26] **Kendra** I love I didn't even have to finish talking. You're just like, "Yes! Yes. This book!" So obsessed with that book. Still am. For sure. Also, C Pam Zhang, who was longlisted for the Booker Prize, she was on the list as well. Raven Leilani, Naima Coster, and K-Ming Chang—and they were all listed. And it's incredibly fabulous. I own several of these books. I'm going to go pick up the other two that I don't have because it's just. . . . I've never been so excited about the 5 Under 35 before. So, yeah, they're starting off really well. The other categories in the National Book Award are fabulous as well. So you'll definitely want to go check all of that out and pick up all of these wonderful books. Everyone can go check out the dates of different things on their website, which will be in the show notes. But I'm so excited. And this is Lisa Lucas's last year as the director of the National Book Foundation. So she's definitely not letting up. She's not coasting, for sure. She is going out with a bang. So I'm very excited for her.

[00:05:41] **Sumaiyya** Right. And I feel like we're living in such overwhelming times—you know, there is so much uncertainty in the world right now—that amidst all of that smoke, it's good to see our favorite authors be celebrated this way. And I feel like this is a time to kind of celebrate everything that we can. And it's great that they're getting the recognition that they deserve. It really makes me happy.

[00:06:04] **Kendra** Yeah. I think especially for there's a lot of young writers on the lists, and I think that's great that there's, you know, we want to invest in these writers' careers and honor their books. And it's been really great to see that. All right! So those are bits of news for you this episode. So now it's time to jump into our theme for October, and that is beauty privilege. Sumaiyya, I remember when you brought this up, and I thought it was a fabulous idea. But what inspired you to pick this theme for October?

[00:06:42] **Sumaiyya** Well, beauty is something that I've always been interested in, not beauty in itself, but the way that people respond to it. And growing up, I've always been quite conscious of the way that we talk about other people's appearance. And seeing my nieces and nephew grow up and seeing the kind of comments that they have to hear as children, that is definitely something that has made me more aware of the social conditioning that happens around beauty. Obviously, books have also kind of given me an interest in this because we don't often see characters who are ordinary looking or. . . . You know, especially in young adult fiction, I think characters are always so beautiful. When I was a teenager reading YA fantasy, all of those books, like I already did not relate to the characters because it did not represent the kind of background or life that I was living, not

just in obviously fantasy. But YA in general. I come from a very different cultural context. But there's also the fact that they were always really beautiful. Beauty was something that the author paid a lot of attention to. So that's always been at the back of my mind. I feel like we have these beauty ideals in our society and in our cultures that also hint at the colorism and the racial prejudice that exists, you know, in our contexts. So that's one of the reasons I've been really interested in this in my own personal life and also in literature. And another thing is, being on Instagram as a Bookstagrammer has definitely made me more conscious of the way that people like to present themselves as flawless. And I guess we have a lot of exposure to that kind of, you know, ideal beauty which marginalizes difference.

[00:08:37] **Kendra** That's interesting, you mentioning in the Bookstagram context, because I think that is very applicable for the bookish realms that we wander in in the internet. And that self-consciousness that comes if you portray yourself as you are every day. Like right now I'm sitting in, you know, polar bear king pajamas. And I don't look glamorous every day. You know, like I look glamorous when I go maybe to a wedding and actually put makeup on. And it's like, why do we do that, though? And this conversation and talking about this theme really made me think about that. And then the books that we chose made me think about beauty and other cultural contexts as well and what that looks like. And so we have a great group of books here today. And then Joce, in the second part of the show, has two more picks, which will be fabulous. And she says that they are some of her favorite books of the year. So it's quite the recommendation.

[00:09:38] **Sumaiyya** Wow, that's incredible. And I just want to add that, so last night, you know, the Instagram Live that I did with Megha, so I did do my makeup, and I felt really glamorous. I was feeling really happy. And this morning, with all of the makeup gone, and you know, me being in my pajamas, I'm like, was it really me? Like, was I the same person? You know, and so I feel like there's this kind of sense of disconnect that it causes in ourselves. And I was really happy to read these books that are kind of addressing that. You know, these books are looking at proximities to beauty and how we limit our definition of people or our value of people based on just their external beauty and how we kind of don't acknowledge people for who they are and rather focus on what they look like, which is maybe toxic.

[00:10:28] **Kendra** Do we want to just jump right in and start chatting about the books that we've picked today. There's a great group.

[00:10:34] **Sumaiyya** Yeah. So I think I'm going to go first and talk about my first pick. And that is MY PAST IS A FOREIGN COUNTRY by Zeba Talkhani. This was published in the UK by Sceptre. I absolutely loved Zeba's memoir. And one of the reasons that I was super, super looking forward to it is because she has a very similar background like me. She grew up in Jeddah, which is my hometown. And so she has that experience of being South Asian in an Arab context. So her book definitely gives you that unique positioning of South Asian women in the Gulf because it's a very complex issue. It's a very complex experience. And I feel like we don't have enough books that cater to that. So what she does is, you know, she writes quite in detail and with a lot of introspection about her experiences growing up and the kind of difficulties that she's had as a young woman in the kind of society where there is a lot of patriarchy and misogyny.

[00:11:45] **Sumaiyya** And one thing in particular that stands out in her book, which relates to our theme of beauty privilege, is the hair loss that she experienced. She writes about how not measuring up to society's ideals of beauty kind of affected her sense of self. It

impacted her because it's really difficult when your family is trying really hard to find a cure. And, of course, their intentions come from a good place, and they mean well. But as an individual who's kind of experiencing that, it is really difficult to love yourself and accept yourself for who you are when people want to change you. And I feel like this is something that one of the other books that we're going to be talking about also goes into.

[00:12:33] **Sumaiyya** And another thing that I wanted to note about Zeba's journey that she shares with us so generously is that her experience of not really matching up to conventional beauty standards actually empowers her to pursue her own path and create her own identity and define herself on her own terms in a fulfilling manner rather than, you know, just focusing on what you look like and deriving your value based on that. And it's quite a flimsy way of valuing ourselves. You know, like if you feel that, oh, I'm valuable because of how beautiful I am, that's really not a strong foundation of you as a person because we are all going to age. We're all going to change with time. So it's really—what's the word that I'm looking for? It's really superficial, I think. Zeba's memoir kind of gives you this idea of, you know, self care that actually puts in the work to become self aware. And I really appreciated that.

[00:13:34] **Sumaiyya** One of the other things that I really liked about it is how she looks at how in a patriarchal and misogynistic society, women are conditioned to be submissive and how women who are being oppressed sometimes become the oppressors towards each other. So there is this idea of how patriarchy and misogyny make women compete against each other. And that is something that her book also looks at.

[00:14:01] **Kendra** So, Sumaiyya, you mentioned that you related a lot to this book. So in what ways do Zeba's journey mirror your own?

[00:14:10] **Sumaiyya** One of the things that I forgot to mention is that she actually writes about how she left Saudi Arabia, went to India to pursue an education. And then from there, she moved on to Germany and then eventually settled down in the UK, where she now works as an editor. So she's really actively forged her own path and worked really hard to make her make herself strong and independent, which I really appreciated reading as a young woman who's also trying to kind of do the same thing, build my own identity on my own terms instead of kind of, you know, letting marriage be the thing that gives me an identity—because I've actually personally been told this by well-meaning people a lot of times that I'm going to feel happy and comfortable only when I've been married and, you know, when I get this sense of identity from my marriage and the sense of being settled. And I really struggle with that because I feel like if I'm not my own person and if I'm not comfortable in myself as an independent entity, then I'm not really going to be happy with someone else. Like, it doesn't make sense for me to derive my value based on what someone else gives me. It has to come from within.

[00:15:30] **Sumaiyya** So this kind of idea of self care and, you know, valuing yourself is something that Zeba's book really speaks to strongly. And it's almost like having an older sister kind of talk to you and tell you these things and help you understand the world because it's really complex and complicated sometimes, especially when, you know, Zeba has this background of being South Asian in the Arab context. And there are different kinds of privileges and disadvantages that come with that. So she addresses those things in her book. So that was MY PAST IS A FOREIGN COUNTRY by Zeba Talkhani. It was published by Sceptre in the UK. So, Kendra, tell us about the book that you've selected for us today.

[00:16:11] **Kendra** Right. So I built a little duo with my two picks today so that you could read them together and that they would give you a full picture of the topic. So the first book that I chose is **DISFIGURED: ON FAIRY TALES, DISABILITY, AND MAKING SPACE** by Amanda Leduc. And this is out from Coach House Books. I think it's published in Canada, but you can buy it here in the United States. So, Jen Campbell—as someone with bodily difference, and so having an experience, but also talking a lot about bodily difference and fairytales and what that looks like—she was the perfect reviewer for this book. And she was an early reviewer for it. And so I am so grateful to have her perspective on this book since she is an own-voices reviewer in this case, but it's also her field of study, which is fabulous. So this book looks at fairytales and how disability and bodily difference play a huge role in how we tell our stories. You think about it, right? Especially, we're going to take Disney. Everyone knows these Disney versions of the stories. Right? So, like at the end, the little mermaid becomes human, lives happily ever after. Of course, the original . . . that's not what happened. But in the Disney version, that's typically what happens. The Beast becomes human in the end. You have always like the villains, who have bodily difference in some way or scars—like Scar. That was very ingenious of a name there. You know, you see it everywhere. Right? Like, once you see it, you can't unsee it. Most villains have some sort of scar or villain, like in all the James Bond movies, basically. And I'm just. . . . It just is appalling to me that we tell ourselves, oh, that's just how stories are. But small children are watching these stories, and they think that that's how life works. You live. You become beautiful. Maidens who are ugly have to earn the right and then they are beautiful and then they are happy. If you finish the story and the person remains ugly in the eyes of society or has some sort of bodily difference, they're going to live unhappily the rest of their life.

[00:18:26] **Sumaiyya** You could be a frog.

[00:18:27] **Kendra** Right. Like, you can see this. . . . Right? You see it throughout all these stories. And so what Amanda Leduc does is she looks at the history of fairytales a little bit, the original versions, how they were changed. Some of them were Christianized, for example, and then were turned into these morality tales for women.

[00:18:50] **Sumaiyya** For women.

[00:18:53] **Kendra** For women to read.

[00:18:55] **Sumaiyya** Specifically for women because only women need to be moral, and men can be whatever they want.

[00:19:00] **Kendra** Yeah, that's basically the summary.

[00:19:05] **Sumaiyya** Yeah.

[00:19:06] **Kendra** And so anyway, you could see all of that in fairytales. And so Amanda has cerebral palsy. And so she went through several surgeries and physical therapy. And eventually we get to the point where she would walk with a limp. And so she was always really harassed and bullied at school. And I'm reading these fairytales. She loved "The Little Mermaid" in particular, because the little mermaid got to walk and run. And for her as a little girl, that was something she really latched onto. And so seeing "The Little Mermaid" and these fairytales through this little girl's eyes, who has cerebral palsy, will change the way you view stories and who is villainized and who is the handsome prince and like all this stuff. And I think that this is something that we need to be discussing. You know, you

can watch Disney. Yeah. But like, have these discussions in your family and with your kids because they're soaking that in. And it's not something that I noticed until I started watching Jen Campbell's channel. And now it's, you know, I mean, the fact that "The Greatest Showman" exists. . . . Obviously, people are not paying attention to disability rights advocates.

[00:20:22] **Sumaiyya** Yeah. And I think this is like the kind of social conditioning that gives us our ideas of what beauty is. And, you know, what we can consider beautiful. And I mean, I really struggle with that because, you know, the idea here is that only certain people are deserving of love and happy endings. And that is the kind of idea that we're feeding children with these fairytales that we haven't really looked at critically. So it's really good to have a book like this that, you know, gives people that perspective and urges them to kind of go deeper and really think about the content that we're consuming.

[00:21:04] **Kendra** Definitely. And this is full of a lot of theory. But what she does is she uses stories to illustrate her points. And she also uses bits of memoir. So it's not just straight theory throughout the whole book. It is. . . . She gives you illustrations. And so I finished the book in, like, twenty-four hours. I would say digest it a bit more. But I was loving it so much. So I'll just re-listen to it. So I really loved this book. And so this is the groundwork, I think, for the second pick that we're going to be talking about that I have for the discussion pick. And so I think that this one is incredibly important just to understand what we are missing as a society in this way and the changes that we need to make. And yeah, it's such a good book. I'm just sitting here gushing about it at this point, but it's so good.

[00:21:57] **Sumaiyya** It sounds really amazing. And I'm definitely going to be reading it very soon because this is, as you know, this is a topic that interests me greatly. Especially with having nieces and nephews and young kids in my family, I'm quite conscious of the media that they're consuming, and the way that we talk about appearance around them is something that I'm really conscious of.

[00:22:21] **Kendra** So that is DISFIGURED: ON FAIRY TALES, DISABILITY, AND MAKING SPACE by Amanda Leduc. And this is out from Coach House Books. And Sumaiyya, you have our first discussion pick.

[00:22:35] **Sumaiyya** My discussion pick for beauty privilege is IF I HAD YOUR FACE by Frances Cha. And this was published in the UK by Viking Books, which I think is an imprint of Penguin UK books. And this story is set in Seoul, where you are following this group of young women. So they live in this apartment complex, which apparently is a thing in Korea where you have these groups of apartments and also has a working space where people get their work done. So these young women, they live in one such place. So they are living in close proximity to each other, but their lives are loosely connected in the way that we experience it in the story. One thing that these women have in common is that they are quite close to poverty and are really struggling to build a fulfilling life. And they are at a disadvantage because of being women in general because it's a patriarchal society that favors men. And the system generally gives power to men.

[00:23:38] **Sumaiyya** So one of the characters is Ara, who becomes mute because of an accident. And she is quite an interesting, introspective sort of a character who's obsessed with a celebrity. And she works as a hairdresser. So we kind of look at that dark place that she is in where she has this really real obsession with someone. And we see the progression of that in the story. Okay, and then we have Kyuri who works at this men's

lounge, which is kind of a front for prostitution. And she's got a lot of plastic surgery done. So she's quite conscious of her appearance. And we kind of look at that culture and industry from her perspective.

[00:24:20] **Sumaiyya** One of our other characters is Wonna, who is pregnant. And she's had a few miscarriages, so she's really clinging to her pregnancy. And she marries her husband without realizing that he is actually not, you know, going to be able to give her the kind of financial security that she'd assumed that he would give her. So we also look at that dynamic of being a young woman who's pregnant and how society doesn't always have structures in place that support women. And when they do have those structures, other people kind of don't really want to give them the support that they need because they're just viewed as someone who can help, you know, run the machinery of capitalism. So they are not really valued for the changes that are going on in their bodies. And so there is a lot regarding that in this book because there is a sense of desperation and helplessness because of the lack of a support structure for Wonna, who is pregnant and whose world is quickly changing.

[00:25:22] **Sumaiyya** And then finally, we have Miho, who is an orphan. And she's an art student, dealing with quite a lot of emotional trauma or instability emotionally because she got involved with some wealthy Koreans in New York while she went there for a scholarship. So her story is also interesting because of the way that we see that she is unaware of her beauty privilege. So there is kind of an odd manifestation of beauty consciousness in the Korean society that we see in her story. So all of these four women, you know, their lives are loosely connected. But they're, you know, in some way because of the proximity in which that they are living, their stories to connect, but just not that intricately. So we are seeing different aspects of Korean society, the impossible beauty standards that kind of, you know, are playing in their lives and that are giving them these different difficulties and struggles because of not being a certain way.

[00:26:21] **Kendra** I really appreciated the intersections of all these different women's experiences with beauty standards, and that's where the title comes from. So the woman who is mute from an accident, she is a hairdresser. And so she often does the hair of the different women. And they come in. A lot of the hostesses will come in before they go to work at the different places where they have like rooms where men come in. And like you said, it's often a front for prostitution. And so they do their hair all the time, and they talk about their beauty routines. And then they also talk about the different procedures they want to have or that they have had and the great lengths they go to like jaw shaving. I made the mistake of Googling this while listening. And they describe it in the book, but it's very much from the character's perspective. And they're like, "Oh yeah, you lose your feeling in your jaw like forever. But that's fine. It's a price worth paying." And it's very much criticizing that, you know, through their perspective. And you see all the great lengths that these women go to and how anxious they are about like their, you know, mouth drooping or getting, you know, crow's feet. And so it was very . . . it was very interesting how all the women interacted and their different experiences with plastic surgery or not having plastic surgery. What industries and what money they could make based on their beauty privilege. And it felt like the different chapters, which are from the perspective of the different women, all are in dialogue with each other and contrasting, which is really interesting to read.

[00:28:10] **Sumaiyya** Yeah. And I thought it was actually a very complex view of plastic surgery and Korean society in general because I understand that I'm reading this as an outsider. So I wanted to make sure that I don't misunderstand exactly what's happening.

So I read about it a little. And I found out that in Korea, they have this belief that if you're meeting someone, then you respect them by taking care of your appearance. So it's kind of part of their culture to kind of look your best, an acknowledgment of your respect for the person that you're meeting because you don't want to burden them by looking unkempt. And I found that quite interesting because I feel like that is definitely something we're seeing in this book where people are quite conscious of their appearance or other. . . . I would say that women in general are more conscious of their appearance, and they really go to these great lengths to reach this impossible standard of beauty. And what I felt was, you know, we're seeing how oppressive that can be when you . . . you know . . . money is, for example, an issue. Like obtaining beauty becomes this thing that you're going for. You know, you feel like if I become more beautiful, if I had a face like yours, then I could achieve these great things. And yeah, it's quite interesting to see all of these different intersections of the culture and then the industry, how that industry is kind of exploiting women and profiting from their insecurities. That was *IF I HAD YOUR FACE* by Frances Cha, published by Viking in the UK. Kendra, can you tell us about your discussion pick?

[00:29:48] **Kendra** Right. So my discussion pick is a book that I read a while back on Jaclyn's recommendation, and that is *SAY HELLO* by Carly Findlay. And this is out from HarperAudio. You can get the audiobook here in the US. And I think you can get the e-book, but I think you would have to order overseas for the print book. But I listened to the audio, which Carly narrates herself. And I think that that is incredibly important for memoirs, for me anyway, for an audiobook experience to have that personal connection with the narrator and their story as they tell their story.

[00:30:22] **Kendra** And so, Carly is the second half of what I was talking about with Amanda Leduc's book . . . Carly Findlay has a condition called Ichthyosis, and it often makes her skin very inflamed. And there's several different types, but for her, it's all over her body. And so she uses creams and different treatments. And so she appears very bright red. And so for her, that has always made her stand out. And she's had to face people laughing in her face, asking her if she's sunburned. Taxi cab drivers will, you know, ask her not to touch the upholstery so she doesn't infect them. And just a wide range of really horrible things because she has a visible bodily difference. And she in particular advocates for facial difference, which is an additional kind of thing in bodily difference kind of categories, if you think about it. And so she discusses this in the book and talks about her experiences as a woman with a disability and how that relates to her life experience.

[00:31:34] **Kendra** Jaclyn and I discussed her essay in *GROWING UP AFRICAN IN AUSTRALIA*. Her mother is South African. And so at the time, she was designated as colored, and her dad is a white Englishman. So they left South Africa so they could get married. And so in that particular essay and in the book, she talks about her experience being the daughter of a South African colored woman and what that experience is like for her and how she's not white. And but also because of her skin condition, her experience is going to be different from a woman of color who doesn't have that. And so it's a really interesting thought process that she goes through. And I feel like there's just so much here that if you're unfamiliar with bodily difference, she kind of lays it out for you. And it's an incredible introduction to her work. And she has an incredible social media presence. And I kind of just followed, you know, the crumbs all the way around the internet and found her blog. And it's pretty fabulous.

[00:32:38] **Sumaiyya** Yeah, I felt like it was a very well-rounded narrative in the way that she talks about not just her own personal experiences, but positions that in different aspects or areas of her life like, you know, professionally or in her interactions with the



media, in her own family set up, and, you know, as children. So there are all these different dynamics that she's looking at and including, you know, love and the pursuit of love and how she has basically evolved because of her disability. Like how, because of her skin condition, how she has evolved. And, you know, the growth that . . . the unique growth that that has given her. So I really appreciated reading all these different intersections in her life and how her experience is quite unique to those. And I felt like she really generously took the time to talk about these things. She shouldn't have to because, you know, she's mentioned in her book that it's nondisabled people who need to be doing the work because disabled people need to live their lives. You know? They're not here to raise awareness for us. And I really appreciated that perspective. And one of the things that I think is quite beautiful is how this is the book that she wishes that she had as a child with facial difference.

[00:33:59] **Kendra** I think she really lays it out for you how people who are not disabled, and they see someone with visible bodily difference, and they think that they have the right to ask these questions. They think that they can ask people really intimate medical details just because they exist. And that is really appalling. And I think what we learned kind of in theory and in stories in Amanda Leduc's book, you can then go read Carly Findlay's memoir and see it play out in her life. And that's why we wanted to have this as a discussion pick because there so many different facets of her life that Carly covers and so well. And so I think this is a great topic when we talk about beauty standards because beauty privilege is something that Carly Findlay talks about a lot and how, you know, for example, disabled people like me can—unless I'm using my cane—no one knows that I am disabled. I can run into Target and get something. You know, I can run in and grab a bag of dog food or whatever. But she can't. She can't pass for able bodied because of that visible difference. And that's the thing that makes the difference in her life. And that's something that she illustrates over and over. And I think that was something that we need to talk more about for sure.

[00:36:29] **Kendra** So that's SAY HELLO by Carly Findlay. And that's out from HarperAudio and other places that are linked in the show notes. So next is our guest. And we have Joce. And so she has two books that she has mentioned are two of her favorite books of the year.

[00:36:47] **Joce** Hey, everyone. My name is Joce. And you can find me on various places in the book community. And I'm on Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube (@squibblesreads). My first pick is called MISS METEOR by Tehlor Kay Mejia and Anna-Marie McLemore. So first of all, there is a content warning for homophobia, xenophobia, bullying, as well as physical injury, including a broken arm and an accident involving a bicycle.

[00:37:17] **Joce** The story of MISS METEOR is set in the small town of Meteor, or Meteorite, in New Mexico. Our two main characters are Lita Perez and Chiquita (or Chicky) Quintanilla. And the narration alternates between their points of view. They used to be best friends, but at the beginning of the story, they are estranged from one another. They decide to come together to team up, to enter, and hopefully win the Miss Meteor Pageant, which is this annual beauty pageant for young girls who are usually high school seniors because you can only enter this pageant once. The popular and well-esteemed crowd in this small town are overwhelmingly white, straight, and cis-folks. And both Chicky and Lita and their families are Latinx, and Chicky identifies as pansexual. There is also a touch of fabulism aspects in this book because Lita is made of stardust, and we can see stars and luminescence on her skin.

[00:38:16] **Joce** For this particular podcast episode focusing on standards of beauty, I chose MISS METEOR because of the layers and layers of complexity that the characters, the events, and the setting bring. In the town of Meteor, there are definitely certain standards of beauty that people need to achieve to be popular here. There is a strong gender binary that is upheld by the gender-conforming behaviors. The popular boys are on the school cornhole team, which is like their school sport. And the girls enter the pageant. Of course, this pageant is like the penultimate Eurocentric standard of beauty, and Lita and Chicky feel "othered" because they are brown and Lita is plus sized. They both embraced how they look and how they feel in their identities. But because of the pageant's history of choosing thin, white girls as their winners, they feel pressured to present in a way that conforms in every way, which includes how they do their makeup and hair to how they answer the question portion of the competition. And this type of acceptability of identity and presentation is unfortunately not just confined to these girls and this pageant. There is also a transgender boy named Cole, and he comes from a family of pageant winners, like a long line of pageant winners in their family history. And he also feels pressured to look and act a certain way because of this extremely gender dichotomous town that he lives in.

[00:39:49] **Joce** However, even though this is the precedent that the history of the town sets, over the course of the story, Lita, Chicky, and her three sisters, and a couple of other friends of theirs—they come together, and they find this sense of belonging and a real type of rootedness in a town that works against them in helping them feel like they belong. Together, they learn how to act like and say that they are absolutely not going to steep themselves in other people's discomfort. And they repeatedly tell others like, "This is why your ideologies discriminate against me. And that is a you issue. And that is not a me issue at all."

[00:40:29] **Joce** I would recommend MISS METEOR to anyone who enjoys small town stories and anyone who wants to read a book that celebrates own-voices, queer, Latinx stories. Throughout the story, Lita and Chicky say, "Hey, if we are going to win this pageant, we're going to win because we are who we are and not because we are changing ourselves to fit what you think is beautiful and deserving." And I think that that is something that should really, really be celebrated and is so joyous here. And again, this book is called MISS METEOR by Tehlor Kay Mejia and Anna-Marie McLemore.

[00:41:03] **Joce** The second book I chose is called ONE TO WATCH by Kate Stayman-London. So here I will put a content warning for fatphobia and infidelity. ONE TO WATCH is a contemporary novel that centers around our protagonist, Bea Schumacher. She is a plus-sized fashion blogger with a significant social media following. She loves watching the show "Main Squeeze," which is basically set up just like "The Bachelor," which I'm personally a huge fan of—with an asterisk that there are many issues with things like representation in the franchise. Bea is contacted by the production company, asking her if she would be interested in being the lead on the next season of "Main Squeeze." She agrees under the stipulation that it will not be a requirement to fall in love or get engaged. Her intentions are to challenge the previous complete lack of plus size and fat representation, garner publicity for her blog, and—to quote the blurb of the book—subvert harmful anti-fat beauty standards. However, of course, Bea gets caught up in the process. She starts forming connections with some of the men she meets, and we are taken along her journey through being on the show.

[00:42:17] **Joce** I chose ONE TO WATCH because it really challenges the standards of beauty that "The Bachelor" and related franchises set up for its viewership. So the book

talks about how in the franchise, they only have thin, white, straight, able-bodied leads. And these people choose only thin, white, straight, able-bodied partners. Furthermore, the small number of contestants who identify with marginalized groups are often edited and portrayed in a stereotyped or tokenized way. And because the show is focused on creating and pursuing a love story, it's sending the message that there is only one acceptable standard of beauty that is deemed attractive. And, of course, within the confines and setup of the show, desirable. This makes it so hard and such a steep mountain to climb for people who don't fall within this narrow margin and to actively fight society's image of a beautiful person who is worth of a love story. And as a side note, I will include in the show notes a link that provides definitions and more information about fatphobia and weight bias, if you are interested in that.

[00:43:28] **Joce** Anyways, in the book, Bea is a very confident woman. But as a public figure who is constantly under media scrutiny, she receives so many fatphobic comments, which range from insults to fat fetishization and objectification. And no matter how high her self-esteem is, there are moments where she really struggles to not let it get to her. She comes to terms with and resolves any internalized fatphobia she has as a result of society's pressure and a barrage of these comments constantly. Another thing that I loved about this book is that the contestants, especially the final few, came from a variety of backgrounds and identities. So the representation included a man on the asexual and aromantic spectrum, a polyamorous man, and men of color. Like I was talking about before, these shows go so far beyond the lead. And they also really need to demonstrate that people who identify within marginalized communities do deserve a happy ending, to be loved by themselves and others. We need to knock down the barriers that society has built around who and what has been presented as beautiful and lovable.

[00:44:43] **Joce** There is a happy ending at the end of the book. And overall, I think the tone of the book is like, "Hey, we are making this fat woman the protagonist. She has achieved great success. She is confident. And she is the main character of the story." I would recommend ONE TO WATCH to anyone who likes fast-paced and engaging contemporary novels. There are also little snippets in the book that come in like a mixed-media fashion. So there are text. There are podcast transcripts. There are email conversations. So if you enjoy that little interspersing, which I think really breaks up the pace in a nice way. . . . And also anyone who is looking for fat or plus-sized representation. And of course, a hundred percent, I would recommend it to fans of "The Bachelor" franchise. I will say that, you know, like I previously mentioned, that while Bea is a confident woman and an advocate, there are moments of wrestling with her internalized fatphobia. And if those thoughts are triggering for you, please gauge for yourself and definitely keep that in mind when picking this one up. And that book is called ONE TO WATCH by Kate Stayman-London.

[00:45:53] **Sumaiyya** Thank you so much, Joce, for sharing your picks with us. They sound like really great books, and I can't wait to read them.

[00:45:59] **Kendra** So those are our six picks for October's theme of beauty standards. So, yeah. Right now, what are you currently reading, Sumaiyya?

[00:46:07] **Sumaiyya** So I'm actually in between books right now. And I'm about to start THE BEAUTY OF YOUR FACE by Sahar Mustafah, which was recommended to me by you.

[00:46:16] **Kendra** I am so excited.

[00:46:18] **Sumaiyya** I am so thrilled that I'm finally reading it. It took ages to get to me, so I feel like I have won a prize.

[00:46:27] **Kendra** You earned it. You earned this book.

[00:46:31] **Sumaiyya** No, seriously. I'm so excited because I know that we have similar tastes in books. And if you've said that this is a Sumaiyya book, I trust you.

[00:46:39] **Kendra** Yes, it definitely is. Like 100 percent.

[00:46:42] **Sumaiyya** And what about you? What are you reading?

[00:46:44] **Kendra** So I picked up a book from the National Book Award longlist. And this is MY AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF CARSON MCCULLERS by Jenn Shapland. And this is out from Tin House. And I love some of the books I've read from Tin House recently. They're almost like thought experiments. And this one plays on form. So it's part memoir, but also her looking at Carson McCullers's life and comparing and contrasting. So Jenn Shapland is a queer woman with a chronic illness, and so is Carson McCullers. And so she kind of analyzes Carson McCullers's life from her own experience. It was made for me. It's like they pulled out all of my favorite things and put them together, like, "Here, Kendra. This is for you."

[00:47:29] **Sumaiyya** It sounds really interesting. And, you know, I read up on the author and found out that she's an archivist, which I found really fascinating. Like, that's my kind of thing if I was able to ever pursue that. You know, I would love to look into archiving as a career in another life.

[00:47:48] **Kendra** All right. Well, Sumaiyya, where can people find you around the internet?

[00:47:51] **Sumaiyya** So I'm primarily on Bookstagram (@sumaiyya.books). And I'm also on Twitter (@sumaiyyabooks).

[00:47:59] **Kendra** You all can find me on Instagram and Twitter (@kdwinchester). And that's our show. If you haven't yet, please leave us a review in your podcast app of choice. And thanks to all of you who have already done that. Many thanks to our patrons, whose support makes this podcast possible. To subscribe to our newsletter or to learn about becoming one of our patrons, visit us at [readingwomenpodcast.com](http://readingwomenpodcast.com).

[00:48:30] **Sumaiyya** Be sure to join us next time, where we'll be discussing IF I HAD YOUR FACE by Frances Cha and SAY HELLO by Carly Findlay. In the meantime, you can find Reading Women on Instagram and Twitter (@thereadingwomen). Thank you so much for listening.