

Ep. 99 | Reading Women Award | Nonfiction Shortlist

[00:00:09] **Kendra** Hello, I'm Kendra Winchester, here with Sachi Argabright, Jaclyn Masters, and Sumaiyya Naseem. And this is Reading Women, a podcast inviting you to reclaim half the bookshelf by discussing books written by or about women. And this Ep. 99, where we're talking about the 2020 Reading Women Award Shortlist for Nonfiction.

[00:00:29] **Sachi** 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.

[00:00:37] **Kendra** Well, hello, everyone.

[00:00:39] **Jaclyn** Hello.

[00:00:39] **Sachi** Hello!

[00:00:40] **Sumaiyya** Hey everyone.

[00:00:42] **Kendra** So today we are going to be talking about our nonfiction shortlist for the Reading Women Award. And this award is something that we started the first year, the first half-season that we did of the podcast. It's basically our book of the year. It's kind of a mis-named kind of highlight of our favorite books that we read in that given year. Now, I will link the full page of qualifications in our show notes. But the book does need to be published between November 2019 through October 2020. It needs to be published in the United States in print. It's by a single author, so no translations as that's a collaboration. And that just helps us narrow down the books that we're reading because if we read books in English throughout the whole world, it would be very overwhelming.

[00:01:40] **Sachi** We would need a whole . . . we would need a whole nother team of people to help do that.

[00:01:45] **Kendra** Definitely. So this is just an extra way for us to highlight books that we have really loved, often under-appreciated books or books that we want to highlight even more. There has been a range of winners, and we'll talk about that in our winner's episode. But yeah, so this is our way to highlight all these amazing books that came out this year.

[00:02:07] **Sachi** Absolutely. It's always, I feel like, to . . . like . . . our greatest hits, kind of, for the year.

[00:02:15] **Kendra** Yes.

[00:02:15] **Sachi** It's like, yeah, at least for some of my picks, listeners will probably be familiar with some of the pieces that I'm going to be talking about today because they've been things that we've picked for other episodes. So if you're a person who sometimes skips around on different episodes and or maybe hasn't—for me, I'm a visual person, so sometimes my auditory . . . I'm like, I'm listening, but I'm only kind of half listening. And maybe I missed some really good nuggets about a book in the past. This is a way to kind of get caught up on these. After us combing through all these different books for these different themes then reading up for our own pleasure as well, these are the things that we feel like really, really highlight the best of what we've read this year. So I think. . . It is to satisfy the award. But I really like these short-list episodes too because these are—I just

feel like—are kind of . . . not like curated, but like kind of. Our list of what we really feel is worth people's time because it was worth our time that we really want to highlight before the year is over.

[00:03:20] **Kendra** Yeah. And this is the first year that we've had such a large group of people to help decide the books on the shortlist. And I don't want to give any trade secrets away. So we're not going to talk about the process. But we had the whole team involved in this. And so, Sachi, what was it like thinking about these books? And you've read many of the past winners. Was that something that you were thinking about? Like what a Reading Women Award book is as you were reading through these books?

[00:03:52] **Sachi** Yeah, like, that's a fantastic question because I do feel like—even when I was a listener, before I became a co-host and then after I became a co-host—you and Autumn were still doing the full final awards. When I was a listener—like this is a fun fact—but like, I would try to come up with my list that I thought might end up on the shortlist, just based off of books that I had read throughout the year or books that you and Autumn really felt really passionate about on the episode. And sometimes would be great. Like, you know, people try to pick what they think the big, you know, the different prizes are going to be. They're like, "These are my my picks of what I think is going to get nominated." That's how I kind of felt about the Reading Women Award. I was like, "All right. I think that one of, you know, X, Y, Z can make it." And then it was, you know, so I probably would only maybe get zero or one right. Or something. But it'd be fun to try to see, like, you know, if I was on the same wavelength as the podcast.

[00:04:49] **Sachi** And then when I came on to the show and was able to see some more of the behind-the-scenes stuff, I did try to read a lot of the books that you and Autumn had earmarked as potentially being part of the shortlist or the winner for the Reading Woman Award, just so I could get an idea of when we're posting about these books or things like that, I can contribute some thoughts to it. And I love a lot of the books that we picked in the past. Being actually part of it this year—as my past experience of being a listener and then kind of seeing the behind-the-scenes things as a co-host—I think has informed a little bit of for this year when we knew, hey, we're probably going to be contributing to the award and recording our thoughts this year, I think it did help me understand of, kind of, thinking more proactively about each book that I pick up. And also, as I'm reading it, thinking like, okay, this could be a really good pick. I'm really liking this. Let's put it on my radar to bring up towards the end of the year. And I think it has made it a little bit easier just being a fan of this before and has made it really fun, too, to contribute to the actual award this year because it's been such a really fun journey, at least for me personally over the last couple of years.

[00:06:13] **Kendra** And I really loved having so many people involved in the process because it's more a voting process. And so that way, it's not just two people hashing out about their favorite book on the list. In that way, it's a broader perspective on books and what that looks like. And we've already made some changes for how 2021 is going to make based on the feedback from this year. And that's been pretty great to try to make it the best kind of process. But it was definitely, definitely a learning curve of trying to figure out logistically how to do it.

[00:06:48] **Sachi** Oh, yeah, everything evolves over time. Right? So hopefully it's pretty seamless for all the listeners, and it'll just be cool to hear more thoughts on it, the episodes and such from different perspectives. But for the most part, for doing it for the first time, I still thought it was really smooth. So I know we have improvement opportunities for next

year, but at least from my perspective, I thought it was really enjoyable. And I'm really excited to talk about our picks today.

[00:07:14] **Kendra** And, of course, with everything else going on, reading these books has been interesting. So, Sumaiyya, what was it like to try to read all of these books for the award during the current hellscape that we are living in right now?

[00:07:31] **Sumaiyya** Oh, my gosh. I would say that reading has been a mixed blessing this year. Obviously, you know that for me, getting access to books has been a bit challenging. And aside from that, there have also been days when it's really hard to focus on reading, you know, especially with so much uncertainty in the future. But I think, in the end, I've been so grateful for all of the books that I've been able to read. And it's just one of the reasons I'm so excited about the Reading Women Award is because, you know, in our own way, we get to celebrate all of these books and authors who have been, you know, who've made it easier for us to get through this unprecedented year. So I really appreciate the comfort that books have been this year. And it's given us a lot to think about, especially with the selection of books.

[00:08:29] **Kendra** So, Jaclyn, you and I have talked about nonfiction books all year long, especially. And we've kind of just been on this huge nonfiction kick. And there's so much competition this year for nonfiction. What was it like trying to decide on books for this year's nonfiction prize?

[00:08:48] **Jaclyn** Yeah, it was a really tough decision. And I feel like, as a reader, that was extremely fun because it meant we had so many great nonfiction reads that came out this year. So as a reader, I have no complaints. But trying to judge an award and narrow it down to what were our favorite picks on the team for the year, that was extremely tough.

[00:09:07] **Kendra** And there was this one moment where we were all nominating things and having a discussion. And there was actually a lot of overlap. So even . . . it was great to see that there was so much overlap that a lot of our favorites—each of our favorites, I should say—made it onto the list, which is pretty cool to see.

[00:09:25] **Jaclyn** Yeah. And I think because we all are constantly recommending books to each other, you know, it's sort of like a year-long process where we're just engaging in these sort of discussions.

[00:09:36] **Kendra** Yeah, yeah. And I've had this running stack of books that might have been possibilities. And so we would update each other. And I don't know, the competition was just so fierce in nonfiction. It was really difficult. And I could probably add another at least half dozen books to this list. No problem. All right. Well, it's that time. So, Sachi, you have our first pick for the nonfiction shortlist.

[00:10:05] **Sachi** Yes. So thanks, Kendra. So I'm really excited to talk about our first pick, "IN THE DREAMHOUSE" by Carmen Maria Machado. And this is out from Graywolf Press. And just a general synopsis, if you haven't heard about this book yet, it's a really unique and innovative memoir told in . . . in my mind, they feel like really kind of poetic snippets. Some "chapters" are only like a page long or so. And then some of them are longer, kind of more narrative stories. The book mainly focuses on on this volatile relationship that Machado has with her lesbian partner. And so it starts with a really sweeping romance that, you know, is definitely very hopeful and very exciting, like many relationships when they start out. And then you can kind of see the tone shift. And this really plays into how

incredible of a writer Carmen Maria Machado is. And you can really start seeing how it slowly turns into this, kind of, controlling and unfortunately abusive relationship on, you know, a verbal level, at a psychological level, and sometimes on a physical level. So there are trigger warnings for this book for domestic abuse, whether it be verbal or physical. So please be conscientious when you're picking this book up.

[00:11:28] **Sachi** But Machado just dissects her experience. There was a lot of gaslighting that her partner did. So her memory of the relationship got a little fuzzy and muddy sometimes, but it also addresses stereotypes of queer people and relationships that I thought were eye opening, at least for me. And so this memoir. . . . I think I've talked about on the podcast before, I'm really into memoirs. I feel like I definitely lean more to fiction versus nonfiction, which is something I'm personally working on. But a nice little gateway into that sometimes for me is memoir because they feel more character driven in narrative than some other nonfiction works. And this one—I've read a lot of memoirs—and this one was so different than any other memoir I've ever read. And I switched back and forth between the audio and print. And I highly, highly recommend the audio, which is narrated by Carmen Maria Machado herself. I felt like it was really powerful and that kind of lyrical, poetic-type writing really comes through in the way that she narrates the book. And I gobbled up this audiobook, I think, in a couple days because it was so, so good.

[00:12:45] **Sachi** And personally, I'd never really read a firsthand account of domestic abuse in a lesbian relationship specifically. And I'm sure this book was really painful, probably, for Carmen Maria Machado to write. But it's extremely, you know, a very, very impressive piece of literature. I'm thankful that this book is out there and that we have the opportunity to read it because it is incredible. I just want to put this in the hands of so many people. Just to be like . . . if you love memoirs, this is something that, you know—especially if you've read a lot of memoirs, and you want to read something that's different and maybe potentially "experimental," I guess—this would be something that I would point to as something that is very unique and very engaging. And also, if you're looking to get a better understanding of domestic violence in the queer community specifically, I think this would be a book that could be a resource for people.

[00:13:42] **Sachi** So I feel like I'm really gushing on this one. But it's so good that I feel like this is something that if. . . . It's probably going to be personally in my personal top ten, but if there is something that someone had said, "Is there a memoir that really stands out to you?" this is probably going to be one of the first ones I think about. So that was our first pick, which is *IN THE DREAM HOUSE* by Carmen Maria Machado. And that's out from Graywolf Press. And I believe, Kendra, you have our next pick.

[00:14:13] **Kendra** Yeah, thanks, Sachi. So our next pick is *WHITE TEARS / BROWN SCARS: HOW WHITE FEMINISM BETRAYS WOMEN OF COLOR* by Ruby Hamad. And this book looks at it—like what it says on the tin—how white feminism harms women of color. And I want to read this quote that I saw because I think it really encapsulates a lot of the issues that are mentioned in this book and what Hamad tackles. "White supremacy is not a left / right issue. It is the very foundation, the structure of the roof in the contents of our society. Racism is not so much embedded in the fabric of society as it is the fabric. For all their differences, progressives and conservatives will often unite in tacit displays of white solidarity when it comes to ensuring people of color do not threaten whiteness to any significant extent."

[00:15:13] **Kendra** White feminism is when white women center their own feelings and perspectives at the cost of the well-being of women of color. And oftentimes when women

of color point out problematic behavior that white women are doing—or maybe just pointing out a fact about the world—white women often get defensive and push back and blame women of color for making them uncomfortable.

[00:16:33] **Kendra** And so what Hamad does in this book is she gives examples from around the world of how white women have used their privilege to really stay close to power, using their whiteness, and how they have harmed women of color in doing so. I really appreciated the way that Hamad tackles different topics around this because, of course, Black, Indigenous, and women of color all have different experiences. And how white feminism looks interacting with different communities of color is going to look different. And so I really appreciated that sense of detail that this book has. But I think probably the greatest thing about this book is that Ruby Hamad wants to stand in solidarity with other women of color. Oftentimes, women of color are gaslighted by white women when they point out issues. And they turn things around and say that the woman of color is the one in the wrong and et cetera, et cetera. But what the author does is say, "No, this is happening. It has happened to me. It has happened to this person over here." And it stands in solidarity with women of color who have experienced this.

[00:17:46] **Kendra** You know, as a white woman reading this, it was very confronting. And there was a lot of uncomfortable moments there, of learning moments, of seeing things in my own behavior that needs to change. And we need to sit in that uncomfortable feeling, and we need to learn, and we need to grow, and we need to continue to listen. You know, after this summer—when so many white women were going and buying anti-racist literature and saying, "I'm going to do better. I'm going to read these and change my behaviors"—after the election, I think it's safe to say that not a lot of changing has happened. So while many women I've seen on the internet have changed their behavior and are growing, there are ten times more white women out there who haven't. And it's our job as white women to talk to our other white women friends and family members about these issues. And so we need to step up. And I think this book does so many things so that whatever background you come from, you are going to find something in it. And I think that that is the beauty of this book, is that it really points out and gives a voice to something that women of color have been experiencing for hundreds of years. But it also challenges white women to do better and abandon white feminism because it is so incredibly harmful. So because of these things and the incredible depth and research and how well-written it is and so many other things I could go on about, that is why we have chosen *WHITE TEARS / BROWN SCARS: HOW WHITE FEMINISM BETRAYS WOMEN OF COLOR* by Ruby Hamad as one of our picks for this year's nonfiction shortlist. All right, Jaclyn, you have our next pick.

[00:19:31] **Jaclyn** So our next pick is *THE DRAGONS, THE GIANT, THE WOMEN* by Wayetu Moore. And that is out from Graywolf Press. This is a nonlinear memoir. And it is looking at her experience and her family's experience leaving Liberia when civil war broke out. And this happened when she was five years old. So there is a lot of the memoir that is written from that perspective, which is so well written and really transports you when you're reading it. Then she also talks a lot about her experience and her family's experience when they arrived in the US and growing up as a Black woman in Texas. The way that the memoir is connected—because it sort of doesn't run in a linear, you know, chronological format—there's a lot of her searching for what happened to her family when they were leaving Liberia, and particularly a person that helped the family leave the country. So I thought this was a brilliant celebration of family strength. There's a lot of discussions around her mother and the women in her family and also her father, so that the title really speaks to that quite directly. So, again, that is *THE DRAGONS, THE GIANT, THE*

WOMEN by Wayetu Moore. And it's out from Graywolf Press. And Sumaiyya, you have our next pick.

[00:20:59] **Sumaiyya** So our next pick is *CONDITIONAL CITIZENS: ON BELONGING IN AMERICA* by Laila Lalami. And this is a collection of essays in which Lalami, you know, she basically writes about the precarious nature of American citizenship. So she looks at how allegiance and belonging are actually brought into question based on an individual's race, religion, class, or caste. And I think what makes this book particularly powerful is the way that Lalami begins with her own experience of becoming an American citizen about twenty years ago. So she came to America for her education and then met her future husband here and then got married to him, which is how, you know, she also chose America and placed her trust in America as the country that she would now live in.

[00:22:00] **Sumaiyya** So I appreciated that we get familiar with her personal experiences. We're also seeing certain moments in her life that really impacted or influenced how she thinks about citizenship and belonging in America. We also see these small moments that she shares with us where she writes about raising her daughter and, you know, thinking about her daughter's future in this country. And she also touches upon some of the defining moments in recent American history, which I thought was one of the most important aspects of this book. It's because, you know, she basically. . . . Through her intense research, we get to see how the current state of American politics was actually developed out of events in recent American history. And it's not happening out of nowhere, with the Trump administration, the things that we're seeing, with the way that certain groups are being targeted and marginalized. So this book, you know, it's really timely and relevant to the current political moment in America.

[00:23:10] **Sumaiyya** So I actually learned a lot, reading this book, in the sense that I learned a lot about American history and, you know, the current political moment in America. So, you know, I was born and brought up in a country where we don't get naturalized. So growing up, the American citizenship or countries like America that actually naturalized their citizens was something that I saw as this a huge privilege that I was aware that, you know, I didn't share that experience. But reading this book kind of was very educational for me in terms of how even that privilege is not certain. There is a lot of instability in that and how it's, you know, not the kind of a shared comfort and existence within this country.

[00:23:59] **Sumaiyya** There's so many different topics that Lalami writes about, you know, allegiance and faith. But one of my favorites is the way that she writes about borders. And she examines how borders are trying to simplify something that is very complex. They are points of contact and are actually, you know, she basically shows you how they're tailor-made to persecute people and maintain white supremacy. And this is done also by fueling the narrative of division and the "us" and "them" kind of idea. Throughout this book, Lalami is actually defining the term "conditional citizen," so she comes up with this one particular definition that I really liked. And I thought that it perfectly explains what she's trying to convey in her book. And that is, "Conditional citizens are people whose rights the state finds expendable in the pursuit of white supremacy." And I think that particular definition gives you a perfect idea of what to expect in this book. It's really well researched. And I would highly recommend everyone to pick it up and read it because it just explains so much about what's happening. And, you know, Lalami is obviously a very, very gifted writer. But at the same time, she is talking about these topics from a position of having done a lot of research and having a unique perspective because of being someone who chose to become American twenty years ago and has been closely following the events in

America in that time. That was **CONDITIONAL CITIZENS: ON BELONGING IN AMERICA** by Laila Lalami, published by Pantheon in the US. Sachi, you have our next pick.

[00:25:56] **Sachi** All right. Thanks, Sumaiyya! Our next topic is **MINOR FEELINGS** by Cathy Park Hong, and this is out from One World. And so if listeners might remember, I had spoken about this book, I think in May for API Heritage Month. And so if you missed that episode, a quick little synopsis about this book is that **MINOR FEELINGS** is a really extremely honest set of essays focused on the Asian American experience. And it blends history and cultural criticism, as well as stories from Cathy Park Hong's own past and talks about the complexities of being Asian in this country. "Asian American" usually lumps in a lot of different cultures, and so the demographic is super wide and has many different people represented just in that one term. And it can lead to sometimes harmful misconceptions and things like the Model Minority Myth. And the disparities in wages between the Asian American ethnicities that are included under that demographic is really wide. And there's lack of representation in culture and media in general for Asian Americans. And there's a lot of really, really big issues that are touched on in this book.

[00:27:24] **Sachi** I've seen some criticism on this book that I think is warranted. That this is not supposed to be all encompassing of . . . you know . . . it's called an Asian American reckoning, but it's not, you know, every single issue is not addressed. It is specifically from Cathy Park Hong's point of view. It's not all encompassing. I think one of my even pieces of feedback was that as a biracial person, it doesn't really touch on being biracial at all in the book. Even though I was able to identify with some themes, I had wished that that piece was covered. So it's not by any means a completely all-encompassing book when it comes to the Asian American viewpoint and issues. But it resonated with me so much because I feel like this book that dives so deep on Asian American experiences and such, it's not really as prevalent. And I feel like, when I read it, it was like, oh, finally. Like, a book that I can resonate with, something that's really highlighting things that are important to me. And, you know, the book can be really, really harsh. And the first chapter alone really punches you in the gut—or the first opening essay, I should say. And it sets a really strong tone for the book.

[00:28:46] **Sachi** And, you know, I've really enjoyed every collection. And every single essay, I think, could be of really in-depth discussion piece that could really fuel a lot of book club discussions. Or Asian American studies in colleges could probably use these essays to discuss different things. And I feel like I just felt seen in a way that when I read different Asian American titles, that's why I read them because representation is super important. And when something really resonates with you and makes you feel like you're not alone, it really helps. And that's how I felt when I read this book earlier this year. So I would really, really highly recommend it for readers who want to learn more about the Asian American experience or for Asian Americans like me who want to see themselves represented more on the page. So. That was our pick **MINOR FEELINGS** by Cathy Park Hong, and that's out from One World. And, Kendra, I think you have our last pick for the shortlist.

[00:29:50] **Kendra** Yeah, I can't believe this is the last one. All right, so the last book on our list for our nonfiction shortlist is **THE UNDOCUMENTED AMERICANS** by Karla Cornejo Villavicencio. And this book is out from One World. Now I want to give a huge shout out here to Lupita for doing such a great job of championing this book across the internet. And really, I think most of the team picked this up because of her love of this book. So I wanted to give a shout out there, and I will link to some of Lupita's reviews or discussion of this book down in the show notes, so you can go check that out. So much

appreciation to her. And when we were talking to the team about different nonfiction titles, this was at the top of the list. So many people were very excited about this book and what it has done.

[00:30:46] **Kendra** So the author grew up undocumented with her parents, and her brother was born in America. But she goes out and writes about her experiences. But she also interviews other undocumented Americans from around the country. When I think about how the media has covered undocumented Americans, oftentimes it's an outsider, like, parachuting in to get the story. But what the author does is she is telling the story of her own community and other communities of undocumented Americans through her own perspective, as one of someone who was also undocumented. I've seen so many people talk about how this was one of the first books they had read that they saw their experiences as being undocumented or formerly undocumented or maybe a member of their family is undocumented, that they were able to read *THE UNDOCUMENTED AMERICANS* and see themselves in it for maybe the first time. And I think that is really the power of this book, is that it really is a love letter to Cornejo Villavicencio's community and her family and the other families like hers. And it is a beautiful piece of work, not only in writing, but in the way that she presents the different topics and her travels. And there's so many different parts of this book that blend together to create this story.

[00:32:16] **Kendra** And I listened to the audiobook of this, so I would highly recommend it. The author reads the book herself, and it is absolutely fabulous. So this book really is as amazing as everyone says it is, and I cannot recommend it enough. But more importantly, I would point you to the community of people on Bookstagram that have really rallied around this book and loved it because it represented something that they wanted to see in the bookish world that they hadn't yet. And I think that that's incredibly important. But yeah, definitely go and pick up *THE UNDOCUMENTED AMERICANS* by Karla Cornejo Villavicencio, out from One World. All right. That's it.

[00:32:57] **Sumaiyya** Yeah, we're done!

[00:32:59] **Sachi** Whoo hoo!

[00:32:59] **Jaclyn** Oh, it's such a good list.

[00:33:01] **Sumaiyya** How exciting.

[00:33:04] **Kendra** All right. So, everyone, stay tuned for the next shortlist episode coming out in a couple weeks. But until then, where can everyone find you all about the internet?

[00:33:16] **Sachi** You can find me on Instagram (@sachireads).

[00:33:20] **Jaclyn** I am on Instagram and Twitter and BookTube (@sixminutesforme).

[00:33:25] **Sumaiyya** So I'm Sumaiyya, and you can find me on Instagram (@sumaiyya.books) and on Twitter (@sumaiyyabooks). If you haven't yet, please leave us a review in your podcast app of choice. And thank you to all of you who have already done so. Many thanks to our patrons, whose support makes this podcast possible. To subscribe to our newsletter or to learn more about becoming one of our patrons, visit us at readingwomenpodcast.com.

[00:33:54] **Jaclyn** Be sure to join us next time, where we'll be discussing our 2020 Reading Women Award Fiction Shortlist. And in the meantime, you can find Reading Women on Instagram and Twitter (@thereadingwomen). And thank you for listening.