

Interview with R.F. Kuang

[00:00:11] **Kendra** Hello, I'm Kendra Winchester. And this is Reading Women, a podcast inviting you to reclaim the bookshelf and read the world. Today, I'm talking to R. F. Kuang, the author of *THE POPPY WAR*, *THE DRAGON REPUBLIC*, and *THE BURNING GOD*, which together create the Poppy War trilogy, which is out now from Harper Voyager. You can find a complete transcript of our conversation over at readingwomenpodcast.com. And don't forget to subscribe so you don't miss a single episode.

[00:00:40] **Kendra** So today, I'm so excited to talk to Rebecca Kuang about her trilogy. This story is about Rin, who grows up as a young girl in the south part of the country. And she does not have a lot of opportunity. She's an orphan who's been taken in by this family that doesn't really treat her very well at all. And her dream is to go to this school, this top military academy. And to get in, you have to take this massive test. And so we meet her as she is studying for this test to try to escape this future that her stepparents have created for her. So she does pass the test, and she gets in. But that's just the beginning of her story.

[00:01:22] **Kendra** Through the series of books, Rebecca creates this beautiful, epic story that's loosely based on twentieth century Chinese history. And we follow Rin, our protagonist, as she tries to find a place for herself at this prestigious academy where everyone seems to come from money and backgrounds of other leaders in the country. But she is just seemingly this peasant girl who has found a place at this academy. And once she gets there, she realizes the work has really just begun. And she must fight to stay in this academy and prove her worth to people who look down on her. This story is really about a young woman finding her place in the world.

[00:02:07] **Kendra** And in the second book, we really delve into Rin's character. And that's really when I fell in love with Rin, as she's dealing with some grief from things that happened in book one. She is developing and changing over time. I was really impressed with the scope and depth of this trilogy, the way that Rebecca looks at military strategy. And I imagine she had to lay out all of these battles and scenarios somewhere and think through them because they're so detailed. And the way that she described military strategy in our conversation just blew me away because this woman knows her stuff. And I just enjoyed every minute of our conversation.

[00:02:49] **Kendra** So a little bit about Rebecca Kuang, before we get started. So Rebecca Kuang is a Marshall Scholar, translator, and the Nebula, Locus, and World Fantasy Award nominated author of the Poppy War trilogy. She has a master's of philosophy in Chinese studies from Cambridge and a master's of science in contemporary Chinese studies from Oxford. She is now pursuing a PhD in eastern languages and literatures at Yale. So she's very well accomplished, and I cannot believe she's only in her mid-twenties and has done all of these things. But one of the things that brings me joy is thinking that this is just her first trilogy. She's now working on her next book. And so I'm so excited about that, to see what she comes up with next. But until then, you have this episode to listen to. So without further ado, here is my conversation with R. F. Kuang.

[00:03:51] **Kendra** Well, welcome to the show, Rebecca. I'm so excited to have you on.

[00:03:56] **Rebecca** Hi, Kendra, thanks for having me.

[00:03:59] **Kendra** The Poppy War series is a huge favor of ours here on Reading Women. And my co-host Sachi is an absolute huge fan, and she shared it with me. And so now I am also a huge fan. So congrats on your series.

[00:04:15] **Rebecca** Thank you. It feels really good to be done.

[00:04:18] **Kendra** I can only imagine. I've been listening to the audiobooks. And each one of them, I think, is like twenty or more hours long. And so it's quite the journey. But I mean, Emily Woo Zeller is spectacular. So.

[00:04:33] **Rebecca** Oh, yeah, she does such a great job. I'm really glad we got her for the trilogy.

[00:04:39] **Kendra** She's like a . . . It's like watching a master at work, you know.

[00:04:42] **Rebecca** Yeah.

[00:04:45] **Kendra** Well, you started this trilogy several years ago, I think around the time you were nineteen. So what has that journey been like for you? How did this book find its home at Harper Voyager? And how'd this whole trilogy process start?

[00:04:59] **Rebecca** Yeah, it's been a very strange whirlwind, especially now looking back on it all, because this really has defined my transition into adulthood because, as you said, I started writing it when I was a teenager. And back then, I had no expectations for the novel. I didn't know if it was ever going to find an audience. I didn't know if it was even ever going to be published. I just started writing it because I really wanted to complete a project that year that helped me process a lot of the things that I had just learned about my family, that I had just learned about Chinese history.

[00:05:37] **Rebecca** And it was during a year that I actually took off from college to live in Beijing and teach debate to high-school students. And I was really finding myself, rediscovering my own heritage and language and roots. So it was a project of exploration and self discovery. And really, just on a whim, I finished it, and I thought, well, it seems like the next step is to try to find a literary agent. So I really . . . I went to Google and typed in "how to find a literary agent" and then followed the instructions from there. And a couple months later, I had signed with my agent, who is still my agent today and who I got miraculously lucky with because—so her name is Hannah Bowman—but she's just fantastic and is an incredible advocate for my work and my voice.

[00:06:28] **Rebecca** And she sent it out on submission a couple of months after that. Then on my twentieth birthday, we went to auction. And by the end of it, I found out that I had a three-book deal with Harper Voyager, which is very exciting. So I really went from having no plans on being a professional author or writing books for a living to being locked into a trilogy contract for the next five years. So I feel like I've grown and matured in the process of writing the trilogy. I've definitely learned a lot about writing in the process of writing a trilogy, but it's also defined every other aspect of my life too. So originally I was an economics major before I started working on those books. And when I came back to the States, I switched my major to history and then went from there to literary history to just literature proper. So now my entire academic career is shaped by my fiction career, and that's what I do now. I write books professionally, and I study books professionally.

[00:07:32] **Kendra** You went through university all through writing this series, is that correct?

[00:07:37] **Rebecca** Yeah.

[00:07:38] **Kendra** My goodness. I mean, I remember when I was in college, I just basically did work and then slept through the summer or something because, you know, you're so tired in between. So I have a deep admiration for your work. Not only did you write these books, but they are incredible. So many congratulations. I'm just tongue tied because I'm very much in awe of your work. And I'm so glad that you found your agent and put this story out into the world. You mentioned you wrote this book to process some things that you learned about your family and Chinese history. Could you talk a little bit more about that and how that inspired Rin's story?

[00:08:21] **Rebecca** Sure, so a lot of the more traumatic episodes in my family's past were not things that I had grown up hearing about. And I think that this is really common in a lot of second generation diaspora Chinese American experiences. I think for many of us whose parents were the ones who immigrated—I was in a weird situation because my parents had come over as students but then gone back to China, and I was born in China, and then we moved back to the US as a family—but for a lot of people who who grew up in the US, their parents choose not to talk about their experiences in China because, you know, the journey across the Pacific is a break and, in a way, a fleeing of calamity and pain. So a lot of us just have no direct knowledge of the Cultural Revolution, for example, or the Tiananmen Square massacre—or even stretching further back—the Chinese Civil War, the Second Sino-Japanese war, etc. So I really knew none of this.

[00:09:26] **Rebecca** And my dad actually initially came to the States first because he was one of the Beijing University students who protested at Tiananmen Square in June of 1989. And he'd seen his friends die. And this has left a huge impression on him. And, you know, that was something that he'd never spoken to me about, and we'd never had a long conversation about. So when I went to Beijing, and I was learning Chinese again and able to hold conversations with my grandparents really for the first time, I was just astounded by what they were telling me. There was this moment later that year when my dad came to visit China as well, and we went to his childhood home in Hunan, where he showed me his childhood home and the bullet holes left in the mud brick walls by Japanese soldiers when they occupied his village.

[00:10:22] **Rebecca** And I just didn't know what to do with that. Right? Like, this was all so new and startling to me, especially because Chinese history isn't really something that you become familiar with in American high school curriculum. Right? Even in college, unless you're like an East Asian specialist, you're probably going to get a very brief mention of modern Chinese history in like a world history introductory course. But you're not going to learn very much past that. So I was receiving all this information at once. And I . . . the only way I could really make sense of it was to try to write it down.

[00:10:57] **Rebecca** So initially I thought maybe I'd do a family autobiography. But it turns out that an undergraduate with no history training is very unqualified to write that kind of autobiography. And doing that kind of project would have forced my grandparents and my parents to spend hours recounting some of the worst moments of their lives. So quickly it became apparent that was not plausible. So I did what I actually always have done since I was young. I processed things through fiction, through imagination, through trying to empathize with what things would have been like for them in like the 1960s, for example.

And yeah. And then that hodgepodge of stories and inspirations became THE POPPY WAR.

[00:11:49] **Kendra** And I love history and studying history. And so when I learned that THE POPPY WAR is based on twentieth century Chinese history, I just immediately was like, yes, I need to read this book. And so I really appreciate the way that you used that as your inspiration. And, you know, this book has incredible depth and really wonderful world building. How did you move from learning about, you know, modern Chinese history to pulling that as inspiration for Rin's story and building that world around her?

[00:12:26] **Rebecca** The world-building process was pretty systematic, actually, even though I think it reads as a little chaotic. So there were two main influences at play. The first was that the plot of the story was structured by the events of China's twentieth century. So it maps the Chinese Civil War, the Second Sino-Japanese war, the resumption of the Chinese Civil War, etc. quite closely. But I didn't want to write the novel in a modern setting, partly because I felt a little bit intimidated because it would have required so much research to even get like the military strategies right. Like, I have very little experience with the machineries of modern warfare. And it seemed easier at the time to set the world in something more similar to Zhou Dynasty China, which is the setting for a lot of Chinese wuxia films and novels.

[00:13:23] **Rebecca** And part of that rationale was just because I was in love with the idea of a fantasy story, with swords and spears and arrows, et cetera. I thought it was just very cool. And I wanted to do a martial-arts story as much as I wanted to do a modern political interrogation. So I transposed all of the political movements and battles and social structures, right, into things that might have made sense in the thirteenth century. So the weirdest part actually was trying to make the battles and military strategies make sense because there's a lot you can do in modern warfare when you have instant communication, when you have the ability to cross the entire country in days or even hours, when you have weapons of surveillance and weapons with the kind of reach that we do now. But it's a lot harder when if like half your army is on the other side of a mountain, for example, you really have no way to get in touch with them except by sending a scout, who could take hours or days, right? So that I actually ended up having to learn double the amount of military strategy that I thought I was going to have to. But it ended up being really fun. And I'm still a little sad that I didn't go into military history.

[00:14:36] **Kendra** Well, there's always more books, you know, that you could look into, I guess. I really loved also like the magic portions, for lack of a better descriptive term, where different characters in your story are called shamans. And they channel the power of these gods. And where did all of—I guess—where did the magic side or the fantastical side of your storytelling come in? Was that always part of it? I mean, you could have, theoretically, had just like a more of historical fantasy story with, you know, different forms of magic if you wanted to. I guess I'm really fascinated how you chose the magic system that you did.

[00:15:18] **Rebecca** So Taoist shamanism and mythology was something that had always really fascinated me, but which I hadn't seen many takes of in Anglophone science fiction or fantasy. I remember learning about oracle bones when I was in high school, which is a kind of divination that involves writing inscriptions on bones or on turtle shells, for example, and casting them into a fire and seeing how they crack, which I think is really cool. There was also a text that I studied in high school called The I Ching, which is the Book of Changes, which is a Chinese system of divination that involves Millsap's stocks and

hexagrams and very obscure prophecies that you interpret to fit your situation, which also makes its way into THE POPPY WAR in the form of the hexagrams, which I thought was awesome and also had not seen in any of the fantasy novels that I'd read.

[00:16:16] **Rebecca** So working on all of those influences, the other element that really brought the shamanic system together was the prevalence of opium in Chinese national imagination and historical imagination. Like, opium is seen as this source of national weakness, right? It's seen as the start, like, the First Opium War is seen as the start of the Chinese century of humiliation that brought Western incursion and semi-colonial presence to China. And I wondered, right, if there was a way to play with the duality of opium as a source of not just weakness but also power. And then it was a pretty quick link there from opium to psychedelics to a method of calling the gods through ingesting hallucinogenic substances.

[00:17:09] **Rebecca** The the other mythological source that I want to mention is the INVESTITURE OF THE GODS, also known as the FENGSHEN YANYI, which is a Chinese classic that is kind of like the JOURNEY TO THE WEST, but I think not as well known and perhaps so because it's way more chaotic. But I think the INVESTITURE OF THE GODS is really cool. And it starts when this king, who is about to be the leader of a failed dynasty, goes into a temple of the snail goddess Nuwa and thinks that she's just so attractive that he writes a very lewd poem about her on the wall. And then Nuwa's very upset, obviously. So she sends a spirit named Sudaji, who disguises itself as a beautiful young woman to become one of his concubines and seduce him and influence and corrupt him to start becoming paranoid and a terrible leader. And that brings about the fall of his dynasty. So the ramifications of that are this massive civil war that involves all these supernatural creatures and Douist immortals and monsters and heroes. So a lot of the characters from THE POPPY WAR such as Su Daji the Empress and Jiang Ziya, for example, are pulled directly from the INVESTITURE OF THE GODS.

[00:18:34] **Kendra** Well, it really comes together in your book. And something that unfurls. . . . I love it in the first book when, I mean, the first book is obviously a lot of worldbuilding heavy, where you're introducing your readers. And then subsequent novels are about reminding your readers of the rules because they may not have read your book for like a year or whatever it is. And so I really appreciated the way that as Rin's story unfolds, you learn more and more with her. That's often a common way to do it. And I think a lot of people can . . . when you write it, you want to also make it fresh and interesting as you're building her character. And I really liked the way that you did that because it sucks you into the story. But you're also getting to know Rin and her struggles with, you know, just, I guess, surviving. That's not a very descriptive term. But I guess I really wanted to ask you about Rin because, I mean, she. . . . You stay with her basically the entire time, except for prologue and epilogue stuff sometimes. You talked about wanting to write this epic fantasy story and the inspirations behind it. But how did all those inspirations lead you to this singular character that you wanted to follow for the course of these novels?

[00:19:47] **Rebecca** I miss Rin. This is making me wish I had more books where I could write from her perspective. But yeah, she came about because I was reading a lot of biographies of Mao Zedong at the time. And I kept coming back to this question of what makes monsters? What makes a person the kind of megalomaniac dictator that Mao ended up being who can make decisions that cause the suffering and deaths of millions. Right? And I don't think it's possible just to explain away Mao's decisions by saying he was just a bad dude. He just didn't care about people. He was indifferent to suffering. He wanted to inflict pain. Because maybe it's true that he had a callous outlook on human life,

but he was also trying to accomplish a revolutionary project that he genuinely believed in. Right? It's not that he wanted to take control of China for the sole purpose of ruining it. So it's instructive to learn from his failures and see how they happened.

[00:20:55] **Rebecca** So a lot of that impetus materializes in Rin. She really does not believe that she's a bad person, and she's not trying to be a bad person. She is just a girl thrown into a war-torn, horrible world, making decisions out of a sense of survival, out of a sense of retribution. She's unprepared for almost all the roles that she's thrown into. She has to learn on the fly. And she . . . she doesn't know what she's doing. Right? And she has no mentor figures to help her through it. So at every turn, she's making choices that she really thinks is going to save her friends and the people she cares about. It's going to save the country that she deeply loves. But because she's so misguided by all of the influences in her life—right?—because she's so shaped by her past trauma, they end up being really, really bad decisions. And it's fun hearing from readers who say stuff like, "I wanted to shake her by the shoulders the whole time because she kept making such awful decisions." But I think it's fun to write a character who makes terrible decisions. But at the same time, you can understand why it's the only choice that they could have made. And that's why it's interesting to read about villains and why tragedies are fun because if they're just making the right decision the whole time, then the story's not very interesting.

[00:22:25] **Kendra** That's very true. It's very true. And I am one of those people who was like, oh, honey, honey, what do you doing? Like, the entire time. And the way also, like you mentioned, her past trauma. . . . The way—I'm thinking of THE DRAGON REPUBLIC specifically—where a character dies (I won't say who for spoiler reasons), and Rin is having to deal with their death throughout THE DRAGON REPUBLIC. And it's very much a haunting, both figuratively and somewhat literally. And so she is trying to cope with that and make decisions at the same time. So she has all of these different . . . all of these different things that are trying to get her attention. And, you know, she's trying to emotionally deal with one thing and deal with things in the present and the past at the same time. And there's so much character development in the middle book. And I think that often the middle book can be very difficult because it's basically the thing in between two bookends. But I felt like that growth was such a key part of the story. And you can't really have book three without that character development and the way that she deals with that grief.

[00:23:40] **Rebecca** Yeah, it's interesting because a lot of the more negative reviews of THE DRAGON REPUBLIC start off with, "I just couldn't stand Rin in this book. She was so whiny. She was so weak and beat down." And I'm over here like, think of everything that she's been through in the first book. Like, how could you expect her to be anything but that? Um, but yeah, the psychological growth over that book was really difficult to nail down. And it took a couple of drafts before we could get it right. It was important to start at a place where she had hit her rock bottom because we ended the first book on such a strong note where she has got, like, powers where she literally can level countries. And if you have a protagonist who can level countries, then it doesn't make . . . it changes the way you approach the stakes for the next few books because, you know, now they're unbeatable. So what could they possibly be scared of? So the next logical move was to take away all of her powers, to take away her self-confidence and her belief in her mission, and to show her struggling with survivor's guilt and PTSD and all of the very realistic consequences of everything that she's just been through. So it's narrative about healing, about finding herself again.

[00:25:02] **Rebecca** The other really important change was that in book one, Rin craves authority and praise. And she just really likes when there's somebody else in control who can tell her what to do because these situations are so chaotic, and she's very young, and she's very scared. But she keeps making the same mistake where she throws her loyalty at the feet of people who are manipulative and awful and do not have her best interests at heart. So there's a moment halfway through THE DRAGON REPUBLIC where she finally realizes that she has to take her own destiny in her own hands and, you know, have a separate agenda from the people in whose service she's in. And I thought that was a really cathartic moment that I was really proud of writing.

[00:25:52] **Kendra** I mean, you mention starting with her at rock bottom, where in the beginning of the second book, she is addicted to opium for, again, various reasons that I won't go into for spoiler reasons. But the way that the different characters are written and the way that the power from the different gods is also, you know, you have to deal with that psychologically. And there's a lot of mental things going on there. What was that like trying to balance these features of a warrior, of being physically fit and, you know, very good with weapons, but also having that fantastical element of the different kinds of powers? And I mean, you have the empress, who has like the psychological willpower over people as well. It's just a lot of different facets come into play.

[00:26:39] **Rebecca** Yeah. So even going beyond the question of what a certain character's disability means for their capabilities on the battlefield there, I've had to play since the first book with the mesh of the supernatural with small-scale tactics because I think it's a really cool question of if you have wizards in your army—right? Or if you have shamans or anyone else or mages or whatever in a fantasy novel—how do you position them strategically? I always thought it was so ridiculous, right, that fantasy armies could have wizards and also like the battle would still come down to just swords and spears when there are people who could literally cast fireballs and create things in the earth. It just seems like so much fantasy understates the impact of those powers on the actual course of a battle. So in the first book, when they're at Khurdalain, I tried to do a lot of work with this, with how Altan commands the Cike and how he positions them. Because another big question is, if you have someone who has a large reach with their magical ability, how do you make sure that it doesn't impact . . . like how do you solve the problem of friendly fire, basically, which then becomes a big problem in THE BURNING GOD, because Rin can set entire cities on fire, but she can't do that because then half the people who burn to death are going to be on her side. So this actually severely restricts how she can use her abilities and when. There's a conversation between her and one of the guerrilla leaders where he says, like, why is winning this war so difficult? If you can level a country, can't you just do that again? And she says, yes, I could do that again, but it would be indiscriminate. And a lot of innocent people would die. And I don't think it's going to be worth it. And so actually having those far-ranging abilities isn't as useful as one might think. So playing with those tactics was a lot of fun.

[00:28:38] **Kendra** I know literally nothing about military strategy, but I feel like you did a great job of explaining it in the book as well because I never felt lost. And I feel like I am the perfect test case to see if you have clearly communicated that because I'm just like, I don't know, I play World of Warcraft. Like, that's the extent of my battle-tactic knowledge. And I wouldn't even say I'm good at that. So I really appreciated the way that when the battles start going, and you see all these different facets of it that they talk a lot about, that you mentioned having to do double the amount of military-strategy research than you originally thought. Was there anything in particular that surprised you about that as you

were writing these three books? Anything in particular that you were just like, this is the most amazing thing that I have ever learned or anything like that?

[00:29:33] **Rebecca** Oh, I learned so many cool things. But I think one of the most important lessons I learned was Sun Tzu's THE ART OF WAR, which is widely known—even in the West, I think—as this wonderful book on strategy and military tactics. I think even more popular than Sun Tzu's THE ART OF WAR is that like rewriting of SUN TZU AND THE ART OF BUSINESS or something, where all his tactics get adapted to like boardroom meetings. And I haven't read it, but like prima facie, it just seems kind of silly. And so like. . . . Sun Tzu—or Sun Tzu, I think, as Western readers would know him—gets quoted as like the be-all end-all on military wisdom. Right?

[00:30:17] **Rebecca** But I actually took a course on China's World War Two when I was at Cambridge with Professor Hans van de Ven, who's my supervisor. And we read a lot of Clausewitz instead. And the big takeaway from that class was that Sun Tzu's wrong about a lot and Clausewitz is right about a lot. Because Sun Tzu assumes this really idealized version of war in which, like, your opening tactics and the commander's intent is always seen through to the finish, like everything kind of goes beautifully based on how you're strategizing. But as Clausewitz rightly points out, so much gets lost in the fog of war. Right? The the big force that you can't control for, but which you have to plan for, is friction. And friction involves things like, you know, the weather behaving differently than you might have expected or troops getting tired or communications getting lost or, you know, just like the general mess and chaos and confusion and suffering on the battlefield, you know, radically alters outcomes in a way that Sun Tzu's highfalutin, abstract, bird's-eye theorizing really can't account for.

[00:31:30] **Rebecca** So in the first two books, they're quoting Sun Tzu all of the time and then crafting their strategy based on what they think Sun Tzu would find prudent. In the third book, I try to challenge all of this by having a character tell Rin, "All you learned at school was Sun Tzu, and all of that's wrong. And none of it applies to guerrilla warfare," which you might have seen in the first act of THE BURNING GOD. So I guess it didn't really surprise me because in hindsight, it should have been obvious that warfare isn't as cute and elegant as Sun Tzu makes it out to be. But it was a really important lesson for me, both as a writer and as an academic.

[00:32:11] **Kendra** I think that's so incredible that you are able to combine your two—you have many loves—but your two loves in that way of studying in an academic fashion and then turning that into this epic fantasy story. And you now have the third book. It's out in the world. And it's gorgeous. I, again, love the cover. The covers of your whole series is just something I want to frame and put on my wall. But what has that been like for you? Having, you know, spent so much time with Rin—you talked a little bit about missing her. I mean, now that you have it out, readers are reading it. And you got your feedback on the whole trilogy. What has that experience been like?

[00:32:52] **Rebecca** I'm in a really weird place right now where I actually don't think about the trilogy as often as I thought I would. And that's partly because I just put in so much work, not just into all the books, but into the launch of THE BURNING GOD in particular. Right? Like this past year has been consumed with last-minute revisions, copy edits, and then page proofs, and then a million and one interviews, podcasts, blogs, press appearances, and the lead up to it. And I feel like I've just gotten tired of thinking about the trilogy and working on it. And also because my next book is due really soon.

[00:33:33] **Rebecca** I made the silly mistake of—I don't know why this happened because it's written in the contract that it was due on January 15th. But I guess I just made up for myself that the next book was due in May, and my agent reminded me, "No, you actually have a book due very, very soon." So we got a bit of an extension, but not as much of an extension that would have made things easy for me. So I, like, all of my days are consumed with writing that new project.

[00:34:00] **Rebecca** So I think it's healthy that I've immediately moved on to something new. I really don't like resting on my laurels. And I think there's an element of masochism to just focusing on what people are saying about the trilogy. Right? Because I think the reception to THE BURNING GOD has been really wonderful. And it's been great celebrating the end of the trilogy with everyone and seeing people's reactions to the end. But, you know, it's out there. And the books are done. And I have no control over them or the conversation anymore. And I don't really want to. I want them to belong to readers. I want those conversations to multiply, but they don't necessarily have to involve me. So right now, I'm just really happy to let it go.

[00:34:43] **Kendra** Well, I have seen nothing but fabulous reviews for the book. And I mean, it is one of the best things, as an avid fantasy lover since I was, you know, a kid, it's one of the best things I've read in a long time. And I just really am an absolute fan, so I cannot wait for your next book to come out. But, take your time, obviously. I am willing to wait for your thing, and I will just cheer you on here from social media. But we are all fantasy lovers here. I wanted to ask you, what books have you been reading that have really been sustaining you during this pandemic? Some people can't read during this pandemic. But I feel like since you're writing a book, you're probably like researching and reading and all sorts of things. But is there anything that you wanted to recommend to our listeners?

[00:35:35] **Rebecca** Yeah, I go through spells. Sometimes I'm just so depressed about the state of the world that I can't read for weeks. And then sometimes reading is all I want to do. But just very recently, I've been reading JONATHAN STRANGE AND MR. NORRELL by Susanna Clarke, which has been out for a while, but which I really didn't get on the bandwagon of until recently. And I think I'm enjoying it more this time because I've been reading a lot of Victorian classics to really nail the voice for this next book, which is set in the 1830s. And now that I'm used to that kind of dry, funny narrative style, JONATHAN STRANGE is just hilarious to me. It's really awesome and really imaginative. And if you're looking for something to just get your mind off things and to escape to another world, another time, that book is definitely it.

[00:36:21] **Rebecca** I am also reading Elif Batuman's THE IDIOT, which is a campus novel that is largely autobiographical, I think, about her first year as a freshman at Harvard. And it's giving me intense nostalgia for the undergraduate life. And, well, this is the first time in a while that I haven't been enrolled in school and not been actively a student. And it's really making me miss being on campus again. And then the last thing I want to recommend, which I am only about a third of the way into, but I'm really loving it is Isabel Yap's forthcoming collection NEVER HAVE I EVER. And Isabel Yap's work is really influenced by Filipino mythology and culture, which is not really an aesthetic or source base that I'm super familiar with. So it's really awesome learning about all these creatures and monsters and myths and ghosts, and it's really gorgeously written and perfect.

[00:37:18] **Kendra** Well, all of those sound amazing. And I will be sure to link them in our show notes. And you mentioned this is the first time that you're not actively enrolled in

school. But I believe you mentioned online that you're starting your PhD soon. Is that right?

[00:37:34] **Rebecca** Yeah. So I thought that I was going to start at Yale this fall. But my supervisor and I decided it would be better to defer a year until I could be on campus and really enjoy it, the on-campus intellectual environment. So I'm auditing a few classes this year, but I'm actually in Florida right now. But really looking forward to when I can actually move to New Haven.

[00:37:59] **Kendra** Well, that sounds amazing, and I am sure you will do spectacularly next year. But thank you so much for coming on the show. I greatly appreciate you spending some time with me to chat about your books. And congrats again on all three of them being out. And best wishes at all the awards next year.

[00:38:19] **Rebecca** Thank you so much. I had a really good time chatting with you as well.

[00:38:24] **Kendra** All right, that's our show. Many thanks to Rebecca Kuang for talking to me about her Poppy War trilogy. You can find her on her website, rfkuang.com or on Twitter and Instagram (@kuangr). Both of those links will be in the show notes. Many thanks to our patrons, whose support makes this podcast possible. This episode was produced by me, Kendra Winchester, with music by Miki Saito with Isaac Greene. You can find Reading Women (@thereadingwomen) across social media or at readingwomenpodcast.com. And, until next time, thanks so much for listening.