

## Episode 3.3 Reading for Alternative Futures, or Hannah's Sad Bookclub

October 19, 2018

Hannah (Host): [00:07](#) [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Hi, I'm Hannah McGregor and this is *Secret Feminist Agenda*. Hello and welcome to the background sound of my refrigerator. I am having a bad week. Is anybody else having a bad week? I'm guessing probably some of you are. As with all bad weeks, there's a whole complex of reasons, but the thing that's really got me spinning right now is the particular combination of, of personal loss and shared species loss? Oh. Which is to say I'm, I'm mourning a couple of deaths in my family. And I'm mourning those over long distances because my family is in Ontario and it's really hard to get back there. It's expensive and it's far. And so while the rest of the family sort of comes together to collectively grieve the loss of family members, I'm sort of just here on the other side of this very big country, you know, grappling with, with these things kind of by myself. I mean, not by myself because I have a community here, but you know, not with my family. So ends the fridge noise. And then at the same time I have really been struggling personally with a lot of the recent news and reports about climate change and the timeline we have to make actually meaningful interventions in that. So I was originally going to sit down and record an episode today about grief, and mourning, and the way that those different registers of grief amplify each other, and then I thought, "God, the last thing I would want to listen to today [laughs] is a podcast episode about things that make me really sad. So how about instead I record a podcast episode about things that do not make me sad? So I'm going to do that instead. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Here we go.

Hannah (Host): [02:20](#) I'm going to talk about books today. But not books in general because that would be too large a topic and I could talk about books literally for the rest of time. I'm going to talk about the books that I have been reading this year that have really been, [laughs] in technical terms, "doing it for me." And I'm going to talk about the connections that I've noticed between those books and why I think these particular kinds of stories have really been, again, technical term, doing it for me. So I actually in 2018 have been writing down the names of the books that I've been reading. I have historically been a person who does not like to document things. I often start with really, sort of, ambitious goals to like write down every blah that I blah, or

reflect on something every day, and I just never do it. I'm just really, really terrible about actually keeping up these habits. But I have been writing down the books that I read, in part because I don't read, I don't read so many books that if I forget to write them down for three months, it's too late and I just have to quit. I can like just go back and remember what I read and write it down. So as I look through this list, which I literally have open in front of me, I'm thinking about which books have, have stayed with me, which books have, have hit me, which books have felt transformative or revelatory. Have felt particularly necessary to me in this moment. I'm going to tell you what those books are first and then I'm going to talk about, about something that I think of that I'm noticing about them.

Hannah (Host):

So I started off the year reading N. K. Jemisen's trilogy, *The Fifth Season*, *The Obelisk Gate*, and *The Stone Sky*. I think that's the order. Jemisen is a Black American, sort of sci-fi/fantasy/speculative fiction writer. And that series is a, sort of, dystopian slash futurist series about, about the end of the world, and about the people who are living through the end of the world. The next one I want to talk about is Cherie Dimaline's *The Marrow Thieves*, which is also dystopian. Set in a future version of Canada, in which Indigenous people are being hunted for their bone marrow, hence the title. Then I would want to add into this conversation Eden Robinson's *Son of a Trickster*. Eden Robinson's, absolutely fucking incredible Indigenous author working in Canada. *Son of a Trickster* is the first book in a trilogy. The second one just came out; it's called *Trickster Drift*. I have not read it yet, but *Son of a Trickster* is what I would call magical realism, except that magical realism is an incredibly specific genre that emerges out of, sort of, a particular cultural and political moment in South America. And so I actually don't think that it is right to call Indigenous articulations of a similar relationship between reality and the magical or the spiritual "magical realism." I'll get more into this in a moment. But it's not dystopian futuristic, but it's, it's doing something I'm really interesting in terms of genre. Then I'm going to add into this Amber Dawn's *Sodom Road Exit*, which is a queer ghost story, sort of, queer horror. I'm going to add Carmen Maria Machado's *Her Body and Other Parties*, which is also queer horror, collection of short stories. Deeply horrifying, deeply queer. And then most recently I'm going to add into this Jesmyn Ward's *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, which is about the sort of relationship between history and the contemporary moment in terms of Black life and Black culture in America. Also a ghost story. So these are collectively the books that I have read this year that have not only blown my mind, cuz because I've read a lot more books than that that have blown my mind, that have been just

incredible books. But they are the books that for me have, have broken something open, have revealed something for me, have shifted my thinking about something. And, and all of them have been doing that by fucking with genre in really interesting ways. By taking up particularly the sort of the expectations of particular genres and the tropes that are attached to those genres, and using those expectations, playing against those expectations to reveal something about the sort of standardized scripts within Western storytelling, particularly sort of canonical, AKA white and straight Western storytelling. And how, you know, genre is a particular place that a, sort of, curtailing of the imagination is revealed. That the kinds of satisfying arcs that we expect, the relationship between supernatural forces, what a dystopia looks like, what a ghost means and how a ghost story can or cannot be resolved. Those are all questions both of narrative structure and genre, and questions of enormous sort of ideological and cultural weight, that can be incredibly revealing about what our imaginations are capable of, and how our imaginations have been, have been shaped, often unbeknownst to us, by the kinds of stories that we've heard over and over again. And by playing with genre, all of these writers have this additional tool set that they can use, both to hold up those expectations, to sort of remind the reader of those expectations, and then play with them, subvert them, reshape them, refuse them in all kinds of ways that are not just about the pleasures of narrative surprise, but are in fact about reminding us of the politics of narrative, and the politics of expected narrative structures. Right? How there is a politics to how we expect stories to end and what we think are resolution looks like, and reminds us of those politics as, in part, for me a way to say there are other kinds of stories to tell here. There are other ways to imagine what the world is like and what is possible, and also for a lot of these stories what the future could be. And in this moment, as I am grappling both with death and with the, sort of, larger scale questions of our collective future, stories that both think about ghosts, which are stories about, about death and about trauma and loss and grief, and stories that think about dystopia, about, about our futures and about what it looks like for worlds to end, that take those things, those those tropes up and reshape them through this kind of political refusal of the expected. Those have turned out for me to be, I'm not going to say comforting or even hopeful, but helpful? Like they're stories that feel healing in a way, even though none of these are books that one would easily call "feel good."

Hannah (Host):

[09:53](#)

A challenge of how I want to be talking to you about these stories is that I also desperately do not want to spoil them in any way, because across the board the endings are really

important. Because the endings are those moments when, at least I as a reader thought I knew where it was taking me. I thought I knew what I was in for, and, and the books kept surprising me in terms of how they refused to give me the ending that, that I thought that I knew I was in for. *The Marrow Thieves* is, is maybe the best example of this because it's playing on an incredibly popular genre, which is YA dystopia. And it invites you, I think, to make links between particularly the heterosexual romance between two young people that's at the heart of the narrative, and what we've come to expect out of heterosexual romance in YA dystopia, which is a reliance on, on what's often referred to by scholars as "reproductive futurity." So, so this idea that our hope for the future comes through a capacity of, of straight people, in particular, to, to reproduce and produce a, sort of, possible future. And in part via, sort of, I think Indigenous rooted refusal of linear notions of futurity, that the book is really playing with, as well as through, a very queer refusal of reproductivity as being the only way in which new possibilities are born. The book really sort of screws with the, sort of, *Hunger Games*-esque conclusion that we might have been expecting. Amber Dawn's *Sodom Road Exit* is also, also a deeply queer book that, that in fact, imagines a queer eroticized relationship. Eroticized. I was going to say "eroticize" makes it sound like it's kind of winky, and the protagonist and the ghost totally fuck. So it's not, I assure you it is not winky; it's very hot. But imagines this, this queer alternative to the ghost story that then also becomes not only a way of grappling with queerness and history and trauma, and the, sort of, traumatic inheritance of family history, but that also uses the queerness of the ghost in particular to imagine different kinds of community building, and different kinds of possibilities than the ones that many of us have been taught, or have come to, come to expect as what, what our set of possibilities is. And you know when I'm thinking about these possibilities I'm not just thinking, I'm never just thinking about the kinds of stories that we can tell because, god, for all that it sounds in, in 2018 like a naive prospect, there's part of me that still really believes that, that the capacity to tell stories differently in creative venues, in, in literature and film and other media, it changes the way that we see the world. It opens up our possibility to see our stories differently and to imagine futures differently. And god, does it ever feel like we need to imagine futures differently at this moment? And sometimes part of imagine features differently is, is imagining or understanding or seeing the present differently. Which is why, you know, work by authors like Eden Robinson, that infuse a realist narrative, you know, that's, that's engaged with the contemporary moment and the politics of the contemporary moment and the, the, the banal and sometimes horrifying

details of, of, you know, her young protagonist's life. The infusion of that world with something else, with other possibilities is another way of imagining things differently or of seeing things differently. Eden Robinson, I, I mentioned already that I personally do not have the language to talk about the genre that Robinson is working in and that's something I am excited to read more about. So you know, some of the works that I've been talking about, you know, Cherie Dimaline's *Marrow Thieves* for example, I think could be described as Indigenous futurism. And I know that the N.K. Jemisen's *Fifth Season* trilogy has been described as Afrofuturism. And there's, there's work on those genres and their histories and their politics, and I'll, I'll link to some of that work. But I've been keeping my eye on conversations about, sort of, how we talk about magical realism when it is not the actual sort of literature that, that originated as magical realism. When we talk about magical realism, when we-- don't we all just hang out and talk about magical realism? It tends to be linked very strongly with a particular group of Latin American writers. I think probably the most famous one is Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Maybe Borges. Jorge Luis Borges. Those are the ones I know. Isabelle Allende, the, sort of, iconic magical realism authors. And, and there's a very particular engagement with, with a history of narrative and with a particular kind of language and, and with again, a particular sort of anti-colonial political resistance happening in that moment and the, the relationship between the quote unquote "magical" and the quote unquote "realist" in the work of somebody like Eden Robinson, it isn't the same, and, and I worry about collapsing those using the same terminology. So, so for now, I'm not going to, but I'm going to say that that her work, you know, this, this recent trilogy is really invested in subverting and playing with the notions of realism. And, and you know, in recent interviews Robinson has talked about, *Son of a Trickster* and *Trickster Drift* being in, being books that she wrote specifically for the youth of her own community, who, who often don't know the stories that, that she's telling. So in a recent interview, she said, "what I really wanted with the trickster story was a book that was youth friendly. There are a lot of teenagers who don't know the Heiltsuk supernatural creatures, because the kids were adopted or their families decided not to go into the traditional culture. I wanted to create a modern telling for them, to ease them into the world my dad, my aunts, my uncles and my grandparents all passed on to me." So again, there's a really significant politics to, to what's happening in these books. And I mean, this case Robinson is reminding us of, I mean reminding us, settler readers of the history through which Heiltsuk youth today would not know those stories. It's the history of residential schools. It's the

history of the 60's Scoop of forced adoption, of the cultural genocide that has been Canada's primary project over the past 150+ years. And that those massive, world changing historical events come through in the stories that are and are not told, and so to, to take up a genre that seems familiar and to tell it differently to, to tell different stories, is actually a really incredibly radical act. Still I want to leave you with a last thought about dystopia, which is actually the first paragraph from a fantastic article about Indigenous futurism by Lindsay Nixon is a Cree-Métis-Saulteaux curator and writer. So here's what this piece, which again, linked in the show notes, says: "We are the descendants of a future imaginary that has already passed; the outcome of the intentions, resistance, and survivance of our ancestors. Simultaneously in the future and the past, we are living in the 'dystopian now,' as Molly Swain of the podcast *Métis in Space* has named it. Indigenous peoples are using our own technological traditions—our worldviews, our languages, our stories, and our kinship—as guiding principles in imagining possible futures for ourselves and our communities." So as like a lot of people, I am struggling to figure out how to live through a moment that a lot of the time feels kind of apocalyptic. I am drawing on the generosity and the incredible work of these artists who are imagining things differently and opening up possibilities, I find, for me to also imagine things differently. I would love to hear if any of you have been reading books that you feel like sort of fit into this, this incredibly, [Laughs] sort of, baggy category that I have been articulating. I mean in part because I love to talk to you about books, and then also in large part because I want to read more of them. So recommend them, please. Books are great. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans] Okay. You know what else is great? Yeah. You know it. It's Kaarina.

Kaarina:

[20:21](#)

[Music: "I Will" by Mitski] [Sings] I will take good care of you/I will take good care of you. I am so excited because this weekend I'm going to go see Mitski in concert. And if you didn't know this from my intro music, I love Mitski so much. So welcome to Kaarina's Cozy Self Care Corner. Today I'm going to keep it brief. I'm going to talk about illness and work. So if you are in a position to have sick days, which not everybody is, but if you are in a position to have sick days or be a student who can, you know, sometimes cancel responsibilities on the basis of health. I just wanted to remind you that mental illness and mental health issues are very much worthy of sick days. So you don't have to be vomiting, or sneezing, or coughing, or full of snot to take a sick day. You can just be ill in the sense that your depression is extreme, your anxiety is high, your intrusive thoughts are getting the better of you, etc., etc. Or you just

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need to run around and do those errands, you know, going to the walk-in clinic and get your prescription, or go pick up more pills, or cook food, and do the things that make you able to manage your illnesses, whether they're mental or physical. Although, let's face it mental illnesses are physical illnesses because your brain is part of your body. I should remind myself of this a lot. So your brain is part of your body. If your brain, if your thoughts are not well, then you are not well and you are allowed to stay home or to set things aside and prioritize your own health. So I hope that you are able to do that and I just wish I could take good care of you. In the meantime, I'm going to go to Montreal with two of my wonderfulest, most favoritest, oldest, dearest friends and see Mitski and come back full of energy and excitement and love for all of you. So have a great weekend. [Music: "I Will" by Mitski]

Hannah (Host):

[22:52](#)

So the show notes, which I promised would be full of links, as well as the rest of the episodes, are available at [secretfeministagenda.com](http://secretfeministagenda.com). You can always follow me on Twitter or Instagram @hkpcgregor and you can follow Kaarina @kaarinasaurus. Don't forget to tweet about the podcast using the hashtag #secretfeministagenda. I go look up that hashtag every week or so and just like every tweet that people have written, so do it. I also saw some new reviews on iTunes by Kelosaurus, and Penny Gwyn, and Kenny S Lu and I super appreciate them, and you should also read a review, you say. A+ rambling discussions of literature. The podcast theme song is "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans off their album Chub Rub. You can download the entire album on [freemusicarchive.org](http://freemusicarchive.org) or follow them on Facebook. Kaarina's theme song is "I Will" by Mitski, who I think she got to see live lately and I can't wait to hear how that went. *Secret Feminist Agenda* is recorded on the traditional and unceded territory of the Musqueam, Squamish, and Tsleil-Waututh first nations where I'm grateful to live and work. This has been *Secret Feminist Agenda*. Pass it on. [Music: "Mesh Shirt" by Mom Jeans]