

## 5.05 Quarterly Reading Update #3

### Angourie [host]

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation as the traditional custodians of the land on which this work was developed and is presented. I offer my respects to Elders past, present, and emerging.

[theme music fade in]

### Angourie [host]

Hello and welcome to *The Community Library*: a fortnightly podcast for anyone interested in stories, and how and why we tell them. I'm your host, Angourie Rice.

[theme music fade out]

### Angourie [host]

Welcome back to the end of another quarter, everyone! I know I say this every time, but it truly is baffling to me how quickly the time has flown by. It's just ... where has this year gone? Anyway, enough with the cliches. Hello, I'm Angourie, if you haven't been here before. I'm an actor and a book lover, and *The Community Library* is where I sit down and talk about mostly books, sometimes about movies, and music and other pop culture. And every three months, I take you through the stats of everything I read that quarter, because despite being a literature nerd, I also love graphs, charts, numbers, and statistics. She has range, what can I say. The way these episodes work is I take you through some number breakdowns, and then I highlight three of my favourite books from the last three months. So, if you'd like to skip the numbers and just get to the reviews, you can totally do that, you can skip to 15 minutes and 53 seconds. [For transcription readers, skip to the section titled THE HIGHLIGHTS] If you'd like to listen to the previous quarterly stats updates, I'll have them linked in the show notes for you, but to recap: quarter 1 was great, I read 29 books, quarter 2 was not so great, I read 15 books, and this quarter, things took a turn for the better, and I read 23 books. In terms of my reading, that is, things took a turn for the better. I spent almost all of July, August and September at home in Australia, which was really lovely, despite my city being in lockdown the entire time. Yeah, I'm not gonna lie, it's really sad to see my city shut down, even though I know it must be done. It's a really important measure to take in terms of keeping everyone safe and healthy and ensuring that we can safely reopen in a few months. So with nowhere to go, and no one to see, many books were read.

### THE STATS

To break it down month by month, I read 8 books in July, 5 books in August, and 10 books in September. Back on track! Only 3 out of the 23 books I read last quarter were non-fiction, and they were: *Becoming* by Michelle Obama, *We Are the Weather* by Jonathan Safran Foer, and *Alice + Freda Forever* by Alexis Coe. These were all very different: *Becoming* is obviously a memoir or autobiography, *We Are the Weather* is about the climate crisis and what we can do to combat it, and *Alice + Freda Forever* is a non-fiction account of a true crime story that happened in 1892. And I really loved all three of them very much, and I'm continuing on the non-fiction train this month by tackling *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome* by Mary Beard. It's more than 600 pages, but I have been

steadily reading about 10 to 15 pages every day, so that's good, I think I can finish it by the end of the year if I keep that up.

Looking at format, almost half of the books I read last quarter were in the form of eBooks. Then 30% I read in print, and 20% on audio. I don't know why my eBooks stat is so high. I love the library, and I had full access to my physical library these past few months ... But when I think back, I guess I had to read a few books for work, and I had to read them quickly, as well, so I could only get them on my iPad as soon as I needed to read them.

75% of the books I read in the last three months – that is three quarters of the books – were from the library, which is great! I love the library! Big fan. I only read one book from my physical TBR last quarter. I have a little shelf in my room of books that I haven't read yet but that I own. And I only read one last quarter, which was *Frankenstein*, so that's the only one that's moved from my TBR shelf to my big main shelf. Yeah, unfortunately I seem to buy books at a rate faster than I can read them, which is a problem. I don't seem to have that problem with library books, though, I guess because when I borrow a library book, I know that I have three weeks to read it, so I want to get it done in time. but when I buy books, unfortunately they often just sit on my shelf for a few months. So hopefully next quarter I'll read a few more from my physical TBR shelf.

My genre breakdown this quarter was interesting – well, I thought it was interesting! The past two quarters, my top genre has been contemporary, by a long way, and then followed by classics. However this quarter, my top genre was classics with 6 books, then fantasy – weirdly – with 4 books, and then contemporary and mystery tied each with 3 books. This is just really interesting to me, I don't consider myself a huge fantasy reader. Although when you look at the fantasy books that I read last quarter, a lot of them were more speculative fiction rather than, you know, hardcore fantasy. And in terms of classics, I guess the weather was cold these past three months. You know, we were in winter, and we've just gotten into spring, but it's still pretty cold! And in the colder months I like to read classics, I feel like I have more time to sit indoors 'cos it's cold and wet outside, and really sink my teeth into a longer, more dense book. So I read *Frankenstein*, as I mentioned, and I read *Dangerous Liaisons*, which was for an upcoming podcast episode, so stay tuned. And then looking at contemporary and mystery each with 3 books, and then looking at the other genres that I read in this quarter, I read quite a wide range, which I'm really happy with. I got in a memoir, a few speculative fiction novels as I mentioned, and also two horror books, which is absolutely wild. If you're a long-time or frequent listener of the podcast you know that I don't do horror, I don't do scary things. The scariest I can go is probably an Agatha Christie. But I ventured out of my comfort zone and I read two horror books this past quarter. The first one was *Things We Lost in the Fire* by Mariana Enriquez. This is a short story collection of horror short stories. It was pretty scary. I read it in hotel quarantine by myself, which probably wasn't the best idea! But I got through it and yeah, it was cool. And then most recently I read *All's Well* by Mona Awad, and this is a horror literary fiction kind of to do with Shakespeare and theatre. And I read that because booksandlala, who is a booktuber, hosts a book club called the Literally Dead Bookclub, and that was their September pick, so I decided to read long, 'cos I like Shakespeare, and I was like, well if I'm gonna try horror, might as well make it Shakespearean horror. And yeah, that was pretty cool as well. I think I'm yet to find my niche in the horror genre, but I'm excited for this journey I'm on. This is character growth.

I read a lot more Adult books this quarter than in the previous two quarters – 82% of the books I read were for an adult audience. I only read 2 YA books and 2 middle-grade books. I don't really have any philosophical stuff for you there, that's it!

Last quarter I came up with a new statistic by which I counted the number of authors I had read from before. So 69% of the authors that I read last quarter were authors I had read from before, and this quarter that number dropped way down to 32%. So of the 22 authors I read from this quarter, 7 were authors I had read from before. If you are curious as to who they were, I read another book by Kacen Callender. I read *King and the Dragonflies* after really loving their first book which was ... oh, what was it called? *Felix Ever After*. And it was really cute! It was a beautiful middle-grade about grief and identity, and it was really adorable. I read another book from Françoise Sagan, I read *A Certain Smile* after having read *Bonjour Tristesse* at the beginning of this year, I read that in the summer. Beautiful summer book, by the way. *A Certain Smile* was also really great, although I think I prefer *Bonjour Tristesse*. I of course read another Agatha Christie this past quarter. I always read a bunch of Agatha Christies. This one I read was *Murder on the Orient Express*, which is one of her most famous ones. I knew what happened because I watched the movie before I read the book – big mistake there, but I still enjoyed it. It was really cool to read it knowing how it ended, and piecing it all together as I read it, that was pretty cool. I read another book from Emily Brontë, or rather, I read a short poetry collection called *The Night is Darkening Round Me*. It was really cool, very gothic, very dark and spooky, perfect for the winter months. And for those of you in the northern hemisphere going into autumn, I would definitely recommend this. Very spooky and cool. I also tried reading another Haruki Murakami this last quarter. I read *Norwegian Wood* almost two years ago, and I really did not like it. But I could see that Haruki Murakami is a very good writer, and obviously he's really well-loved in the book community, so I decided to give him another shot, and so I read *After Dark*. And I really enjoyed it, I enjoyed it a lot more than *Norwegian Wood*, that's for sure. This one, I just connected with it a lot more, I felt that the characters were a lot more realistic. And the atmosphere was really beautiful and the premise was really cool, it's all set over one night in Tokyo, so that was really awesome as well. I don't think Haruki Murakami is a new favourite author of mine, I didn't love *After Dark* enough to be like, oh my god, now I'm going to read everything by Haruki Murakami. But I haven't written him off completely because I did really like *After Dark*. Last quarter I also read yet another William Shakespeare. I read *The Taming of the Shrew*. And I hated it. Like, a lot. Like, I really hated it. But to hear more of my thoughts on *The Taming of the Shrew* you're gonna have to stay tuned for when I chat to you next time, because I read it for a specific podcast episode, so look out for that. But yeah, no, it was not my fave. Not at all. And finally, another author I read from who'd I read from before last quarter was Robin Stevens. I read – oh, listen to that bird. Good morning. I read *A Spoonful of Murder*, which I believe is the sixth book in her ... [bird tweeting] I can't concentrate because of that bird! Um, it's in the sixth book in her *Murder Most Unladylike* series. It's a middle-grade mystery series about two fourteen-year-old-girls who solve mysteries, and it's really cute, so I loved that.

Moving right along, my DNFs – that's books I did not finish – this quarter went down by one book from last quarter. So, last quarter I DNF'd 6, and this quarter it was only 5. And I DNF books for multiple reasons, sometimes it's because I don't like it, sometimes it's just not the right time, sometimes it's just the writing style I can't get past, and I had all three of those reasons contributed to books I didn't finish this quarter.

Now moving along to nation of origin: this is the data I find the most interesting, which is why I save it till last, lucky you. A goal of mine is to read close to 50% from non-US or UK countries. So to explain that a bit better, at the moment my pie-chart for my whole year of reading is split into thirds when it comes to nation of origin: a third from the UK, a third from the US, and a third from other countries. Ideally, I want to get it to 50% from other countries, and 25% from the UK, 25% from the US. This month, almost half the books I read were from the US. It's fine. I'm fine. I'm not putting too much pressure on myself about it, but I'm just like, huh, I should keep a better eye on that. 20% of the books I read last quarter were from the UK, and then the remaining 30% were from other countries, including, in alphabetical order: Argentina, Australia, Brazil, France, Japan and New Zealand.

And one of the ways I like to consciously expand the countries I'm reading from is try and read more books in translation. So of the 23 books I read last quarter, 5 were in translation. Doesn't seem like much, but I'm actually really happy with this number, because I've now hit my goal to read 12 translated books in 2021. Which is great! Yay, go me! Of course I'm still going to endeavour to read more translated fiction in the rest of the year, especially translated from languages or countries I haven't read from before. If you're curious, so far this year I've read 5 books translated from French, two from German, and one each from Hungarian, Arabic, Spanish, Portuguese and Japanese.

So now that I've talked your ear off with stats and numbers, I'm going to give three reviews for three of my favourite books last quarter; one book for each month. But before I do that, let's take a little break. I'm gonna blow out this scented candle that I've had burning, I'm gonna grab a drink of water, so maybe you wanna, I don't know get a cup of tea or a biscuit or something, and we'll meet back here in two seconds. And then we'll talk about some of my favourite books of the last three months.

[music]

Okay, we're back. I got a snack, I had a drink of water. I hope you have a snack too. Okay, let's get into the reviews! So, when I choose which books to review in my quarterly stats, I like to choose books that I haven't spoken about before on the podcast, or also books that I don't plan to speak about in future – so for example, not books that I read specifically for research on the podcast. I also like to choose books you might not have heard of, as well, in case you are looking for a hidden gem. So, let's get on with it!

## **THE HIGHLIGHTS**

### **JULY**

#### ***The Empress of Salt and Fortune* by Nghi Vo, 2020**

In an empire reminiscent of imperial China, a clerk is sent to document the histories of the land. When they stumble upon an old hut, they meet Rabbit, who tells them the story of the rise of Empress In-yo through curious objects and artefacts.

I don't usually go for high fantasy – in fact, I'd say it's one of my least-favourite genres. The type of fantasy that I like is urban fantasy, where at least part of the story takes place in the real world. For

example, *Percy Jackson* is considered an urban fantasy because you've got the real world and then the magical world of Gods and Monsters. And I also really like speculative fiction and magical realism, I really like the blending of the mythical and the real. But high fantasy I sometimes really struggle to connect with. I just find it really difficult to learn and understand a whole new world, and also because ... I don't know, sometimes when I read this new fantasy world and I can see that everything's an allegory for the real world, I'm like, well, why didn't you just set it in the real world then? BUT, all that said, *The Empress of Salt and Fortune* was a massive surprise, because it not only exceeded my expectations, but it took the spot of my favourite book I read in July, which is very surprising because it's a full-blown, like, high fantasy book. Or rather, a novella – it's really short. So, a few ways that this book really worked for me; the first is that it's a novella, so it really didn't spend too much time on world-building, which I often find quite tedious. Because it was so short, it didn't really have time. It was really much more about the characters, and you discovered the world through the characters. The writing style, as well, I absolutely loved, it's very fairy-tale like. The format is interesting, as well, because it's told in a folklore-inspired format, where you have one character presenting an artefact or an object, and then you go into the history of that object and you discover the story that way. So, it becomes really magical and immersive, and the writing just had a really spell-binding quality about it. And it was really successful, because it got me really invested in the characters in a very short number of pages, which is great!

Another thing that I really loved about this book was the queer representation. So, our point of view character uses they/them pronouns, and it also features a sapphic relationship – and also in the next book in the series, which I also read, there are more queer relationships. But what I particularly loved about this one was just how queerness was actually woven into the fabric of this fantasy world. It wasn't an oddity, or something to be feared, it was simply part of the universe. And I love that Nghi Vo chose to do that with this world, because that's the wonderful thing about fantasy worlds: you can make them what you want, and Nghi Vo chose to create and represent a world in which queerness is an important part of these characters' existences, but isn't used against them as a form of oppression. Of course when talking about queer representation and queer stories, it's always really important to uplift and see stories about the realities of what it's like to be queer in our society, both in the past and in the present, and how a lot of hardship comes with that. But what I love about *The Empress of Salt and Fortune* is that Nghi Vo gives us a world that we can look up to and hope for, in which queer identities are such an important part of this world, and never questioned, and always celebrated, and just a really important part of the fabric of this magical universe.

Overall, this short fantasy novella was magical and cosy, which I love, and just exactly what I needed to read in the middle of cold, dreary Melbourne winter, when we all had to stay inside! I'd say this has similar vibes to *When the Moon was Ours* by Anna-Marie McLemore, if you're a fan of that book or their other works. That's the only one of theirs that I've read, but they also have a very fairytale-like quality to their writing, and incorporate queerness into their fantasy worlds. So if you're a fan of that book, then definitely give this a go. But I'd also recommend *The Empress of Salt and Fortune* alongside *The Raven Boys* by Maggie Stiefvater. I didn't love *The Raven Boys* myself, but I do think it has a similar atmosphere if you're looking for something really cosy and magical. Also, if you like the movie *Labyrinth*, which is one of my favourite movies of all time – I've gotta re-watch it for the Halloween season, I would say *The Empress of Salt and Fortune* is similar to that.

**AUGUST**

### ***Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* by Anita Loos, 1925**

Lorelei Lee from Little Rock Arkansas is a not-so-dumb blonde with an insatiable appetite for orchids, champagne and diamonds. Here are her “diaries”, in which Lorelei documents her and her friend Dorothy entertaining suitors across Jazz Age Europe. Their ridiculous adventures always seem to end with Lorelei getting money, jewellery, or both – all the while not committing to any man.

So this book was turned into a film in 1953 starring Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell, and that is one of my favourite movies of all time, and I cannot believe that I lived twenty-and-a-half years in this world before realising that the film was based on a book, and to actually read the book! But I did, and let me tell you it's BRILLIANT. And I don't want you to be turned off by the fact that this book was written in 1925, because it's not old-fashioned at all, and it reads so much like a precursor to *Bridget Jones' Diary* or *The Princess Diaries* or *Angus, Thongs and Perfect Snogging*. It's very casual and confessional, and really, really funny. And similarly to all those modern books that I just listed, it's riddled with intentional spelling-mistakes and incorrect use of turns of phrase, and is very self-aware, in that you know that the author, Anita Loos, is putting on this character of Lorelei Lee. And even though the story is written from Lorelei Lee's perspective as her diaries, you can even still see a bit of the author coming through, kind of poking fun at her. And the characters are just so expertly crafted – Lorelei in particular. At every page I was just questioning whether she was vapid and lucky, or actually a calculated mastermind. There's a lot of, like, I guess you would call it, like, girl boss energy ... but the good kind! If there is such a thing. The book was a huge phenomenon in the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century, it was made into a Broadway musical, and then a film with Marilyn Monroe, obviously. And I just will not stop yelling about it in the hopes that its success will be revived. I can't believe I didn't know about it! Maybe I'm just not, I don't know, getting my news from the right places! And in my honest opinion ... no, not honest – what is it? In my humble opinion! In my humble opinion, I think it should be studied alongside *The Great Gatsby*, another novel of that year. That's just my two cents. Obviously I'd recommend this one for fans of *Bridget Jones' Diary* – both the book and the movie, and also *Angus, Thongs and Perfect Snogging* – the book and the movie.

### **SEPTEMBER**

#### ***Water Under the Bridge* by Sumner Locke Elliott, 1977**

Sydney, 1932. Neil is an aspiring actor who wants to leave behind his life of poverty in which he was raised. Maggie is has come from a country-town to find work as a journalist in the big city. The lives of Neil, Maggie, and the people who form their realities intertwine throughout the thirties, the Depression and World War II; a time of shifting values and new horizons.

I picked up *Water Under the Bridge* when I didn't know what to read. I had four contenders, and I decided to read a chapter from each of them, and then decide which one I wanted to continue with. So I had a Zadie Smith, a short memoir, a 1930s mystery, and then *Water Under the Bridge*, which my dad actually recommended to me because he told me one of the characters is exactly like his grandmother. And so I read a chapter of each book, and to my surprise, *Water Under the Bridge* captivated my attention immediately, and it was the one I continued with. Why was I surprised, you may ask? I guess because I'd never heard about it before ... which I have of course learnt is never an

indication that a book is not good. And I just ... it was just so captivating, and it's kinda hard to describe this book, but I will try. So, *Water Under the Bridge* is very reflective of its title. It's about a cast of characters swirling and dancing around each other in the tumultuous current of between-the-wars Sydney. And this isn't a plot-driven novel. The narrative isn't very strong, but the characters are so expertly written, that it really doesn't need to be. Each character is real, and raw, and distinctive, and all their best qualities and most shameful failings are laid bare for the audience. It's a really vulnerable reading experience, I feel like. And their relationships are also really nuanced and subtle, but very easily recognisable. You know, I felt like I was right there with them, in each relationship, each scene, each strange dynamic. I never felt like I was closed off from these characters, I felt so incredibly close to them. Maggie McGhee and Neil Atkins, our protagonists, were such brilliantly flawed heroes. Just the way Elliott crafted Neil's relationship with his adoptive mother, Shasta, was especially poignant. That whole storyline just like ... oh my god, it broke my heart. I really loved this book so much that I struggle to put into words why I think it's so good. I think it just really connected with me in a way that I didn't expect, and I think it's so brilliantly written. If you're looking for really good writing, definitely read this book. Of course, going into it, be mindful that it was written in 1977 and was written about 1930s Australia, and because of that, some of the language is quite dated, not the kind of terminology and words that we would use now to describe things. So yeah, just be mindful of that going in.

I would recommend *Water Under the Bridge* to anyone who loves literary fiction. But specifically, I think two really good comparisons are *Everything I Never Told You* by Celeste Ng and *Normal People* by Sally Rooney. So, *Everything I Never Told You* has a bit of a mystery twist – it's a family dynamic with a bit of a mystery twist, which *Water Under the Bridge* also has. And *Normal People* – as I'm sure you all know, it's a very popular book! – is about a very nuanced relationship dynamic between two people, and *Water Under the Bridge* features that as well. In terms of movies, if you liked the movie *Atonement* – or the book, for that matter, though I haven't read it – then *Water Under the Bridge* is set during the same time period and has similar themes of love and family and connection, though of course takes place in Australia instead of England. So if you liked those books or movies and want something similar, then *Water Under the Bridge* is definitely the way to go, but if you didn't like these books or movies, then perhaps *Water Under the Bridge* will fulfill what you were looking for the first time. And I think that principle applies to all of my 'if you liked this, then this is similar', recommendations. So take it with a grain of salt, as well, I don't know anything.

That's all I've got for you today, folks! I hope you enjoyed this third instalment of my quarterly reading updates. If you'd like to go back and listen to the first two, I will of course have them linked in the show notes for you. And the next time we talk about reading stats will be at the end of the year! Oh my gosh, that's only three months away. Wow. In two weeks' time I'll have an episode for you all about 90s teen movie adaptations of classic literature – woah, what a mouthful, but it's super exciting! Stay tuned for that, I've been working really hard on it. I hope it's good! I hope by the time you listen to it, it's good, it's pretty terrible right now, but anyway. If you would like to access a full transcription [hello, transcription readers! ☺] of this episode, or any of the episodes I've put out on the podcast, it will be available on my website, [angourieslibrary.com](http://angourieslibrary.com). And, you can always follow me on Instagram @the\_community\_library. I don't respond to DMs, but I do read them, and I do note down any suggestions or feedback you have from the podcast, so let me know what you thought! If you prefer to DM me on Instagram, or if you prefer to comment on my website post that will be linked to this episode. So, yeah, until next time, I hope you're all taking really good care of yourselves and reading good books. I'll talk to you in two weeks. Bye!

