

Episode 1.1 The Neverending Story of Bad Decisions with Bonnie

Angourie (Host)

Before we 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 pay my respects to Elders past, present, and emerging.

Bonnie (Guest)

Like, I wanna be Atreyu in my life, like ...

Angourie (Host)

I wanna be the luck dragon. Can we –

Bonnie (Guest)

Oh ... dream team!

Angourie (Host)

Yes!

Bonnie (Guest)

Hell yeah!

[Ukulele theme music]

Angourie (Host)

Hello there! I'm Angourie –

Bonnie (Guest)

And I'm Bonnie –

Angourie

And you are listening to The Community Library.

[Ukulele theme music]

Angourie

This episode, Bonnie and I will be discussing *The Neverending Story* by Michael Ende. But, before we do ... can you tell us a bit about yourself, Bonnie, please?

Bonnie

Okay. I'm Bonnie. I'm a friend of Angourie's, um, we went to school together. I like books. I can rollerskate pretty well.

[Intermission music]

Angourie

So, um, let's get into it! Our first segment is Sparknotes Says. So in this segment we're going to introduce the story and the characters and some of the general themes. Just so that you know, this podcast will not be spoiler-free, we are going to give you all the spoilers.

I'm just going to read you the blurb on the back of my copy, just so that you get an idea of what the book is about.

"Small, fat, and insignificant, Bastian Balthazar Bux is nobody's idea of a hero, least of all his own. One day he steals a mysterious book and hides away to read it, only to find himself stepping through its pages into the world of Fantastica. Enchanted, perilous, dying Fantastica is waiting for a Messiah, its fairy people doomed, until Bastian appears as their saviour, and in doing so, saves himself."

Bonnie

My blurb is pretty much the same, minus a few words.

I think it's a good introduction to the story, but it's also very misleading. It's all about him, which is interesting, I think, given what happens to him thinking everything's about him.

Angourie

I think it's also interesting how it says "he saves himself". More like he destroys himself! I think a few people might have seen the film – the 1984 film, something like that? And the film actually only covers the first half of the book. So in the first half of the book, Bastian is reading *The Neverending Story*, following the story of Atreyu and Falkor the Luck Dragon as they try to help The Childlike Empress, who is sick and dying, and she's the ruler of Fantastica. They're trying to figure out what's wrong with her, how to help her, how to save her. They realise the only way to save her is for her to be given a new name. And a human must give her a new name, and that's where Bastian comes in.

The second half of the book follows Bastian actually diving into the book and becoming part of the story himself. And that's kind of when it all goes ... pear-shaped.

[Intermission music]

Angourie

Okay, should we move onto our next segment –

Bonnie

Yeah –

Angourie

Which is *Judging a Book By Its Cover*, my favourite thing to do! In this segment, we will not only talk about the literal cover of the book, but also the materiality of it, and what it means to read a physical book, and how that impacts the story.

Bonnie

Um, so I have a really recent copy that is illustrated – well, the front cover is illustrated – by my favourite illustrator in the world. His name's Chris Riddell. So, on the front cover we have the – the emblem that's on the ... Aurnyn?

Angourie

Yep –

Bonnie

Yeah. Um, of the two snakes biting each other. And then there's Atreyu on Falkor, which I think is interesting that Bastian's not actually on the front cover. Um, and so, it's, you know, maybe the real hero.

My copy has – everything that happens in the real world is in italics, and everything that happens within Fantastica is in just, like, normal straight font. Which, maybe this is like the lit student in me reading into it too far, 'cause I'm sure it was just, you know, handy? But I found it interesting that everything that happened in reality happened – was in italics, because it felt less real. If it's in italics it's like, thoughts, but it's reality. And so – everything that happened in Fantastica seemed more grounded in reality than everything that happened in real life.

Angourie

My copy is very old. It's – so it's the first English copy, so it was published in 1983. But this copy is interesting because it's published in red and green. So, everything that happens in the real world is in red text, and everything that happens in the story is in green text. One thing I really, really loved about the different colours – or in your case, italics and non-italics – is how it actually crosses the boundaries between the worlds. When Bastian first dives into the book, Bastian is kind of just standing in the sand, and is wondering if anybody else is reading the book at that moment. Because he has dived into the book, he's left it in the real world, and he's wondering if anyone else is reading it, and if he could send them a sign. And so he writes in the sand "B B B", his initials, and it's in red.

Bonnie

Which implies that it is taking place in the real world. Then we go into the book within a book, and it – we become the person reading the book, we become who Bastian was. And he is sending us a message from within the book, and it kind of blurs the lines between whether this is a story, or whether this is actually happening to someone, and we're the next person to pick up the book.

Angourie

And I like how the materiality of the book, and the physical object of the book is quite an integral part to the story-telling.

[Intermission music]

Angourie

Let's move onto *Where in the World*. In this segment we will talk about setting, the limitations of the world, and Ende's world-building.

Bonnie

We're assuming reality is our world, or I did, anyway – that it has all the limitations of our world. But when we enter Fantastica, we learn a few things. We learn that it has no borders, there's no limit, there's no end. However, for a human to escape Fantastica, they have to reach the end of Fantastica. And the Ivory Tower sits central, if you can have a centre to infinity.

Angourie

And reading that I was like: well that's so hard to grapple with, and why would anyone make that a rule of world-building, that's so stupid. And then I thought: but, wait a second! The universe is like that.

Bonnie

Yeah –

Angourie

Our universe has no borders. It's a really hard concept to grapple with, but I think it's just as hard as grappling with the concept that the universe is infinite, and space is infinite.

[Intermission music]

Angourie

Another thing that – that I wanted to talk about in terms of setting is the rules of life and death in Fantastica. The first death of the book. Atreyu sets off on his quest to help The Childlike Empress, and so he sets out on his horse, he's called Artax, and it's Artax and Atreyu, like, against the world. The first wise old being that they go to see is the big turtle, whose name escapes me right now ... What's her name?

Bonnie

Morla the Aged One.

Angourie

Morla the Aged One. But to get to Morla the Aged One, you have to cross the swamp of sadness, and it makes you so sad that you don't want to go on anymore. And Atreyu is protected because he's wearing the gem of The Childlike Empress, so he isn't affected by the swamps of sadness. But Artax is! And he dies, and it's really sad.

Bonnie

Oh – devastating. Especially in the movie. Yeah, it is one of, like, the moments of the book that is just quite sad and there's no escape from that.

Angourie

I think that moment where the horse dies really stands out to me because it's – it's a moment of raw emotion, and when you're in this world surrounded by fantastical beings, beings that feel no empathy, beings that cannot love, you suddenly see this boy who's just lost his horse. And that's a really raw and emotional thing that anyone reading the book

can, um, identify with. It's the loss of a friend, a pet, um, someone who was always by your side.

[Intermission music]

Angourie

The other thing that I want to address is when Bastian stabs Atreyu. So, when Bastian delves into this world, Bastian is creating Fantastica as he goes through it. With every story that he creates, he forgets his life in the human world. And Atreyu and Falkor think it's very important for Bastian to get back to his human world, but to do that, they need to take the gem away from him. So a battle ensues, and it ends in a confrontation between Atreyu and Bastian.

Bonnie

That moment is one of the most well-crafted literary moments, I think, ever. Like, I gasped out loud. 'Cause you just never think that that will happen between those two characters, because Bastian idolises Atreyu. It was – it's incredible. That, like, I can't even describe. Reading five-hundred-pages-worth of *The Neverending Story* is worth it just for the magic of that moment.

Angourie

Yep –

Bonnie

Cause it's tangible violence. And you – we don't get that much tangible violence. There's mention of war, there's mention of fighting, we know that battles are going on and people are fighting. But we never get that real gritty: this is me, a human, stabbing – hurting someone I care about and I idolise, and I'm tangibly doing it. And that is – it was so confronting.

Angourie

And especially 'cause the blood is a massive part of it. And, I don't think we see blood in any other part of the novel. The line is: "Bastian struck Atreyu in the chest. Blood spurted from the gaping wound." It's such a human, mortal act of physical violence. And you don't get that because Artax dies in a magical situation, people are destroyed in a magical situation, Fantastica itself in the first half of the book is being destroyed by The Nothing, which is magical in itself. And this is the first time where you have pure human violence, and it's really disturbing.

[Intermission music]

Angourie

Okay, should we move on to talking about the characters? We kind of have two main characters –

Bonnie

Yep –

Angourie

In the first half of the book, I would argue that Atreyu is the lead –

Bonnie

Yep –

Angourie

And Bastian is a version of the reader, reading about Atreyu's story. And then as soon as Bastian comes into Fantastica, Atreyu is just shoved to the side, and Bastian is like "there's a new sheriff in town, I'm here to run this show, and I am the hero."

At the start he is a version of the reader, we're rooting for him, we want him to succeed. We want him to save The Childlike Empress and give her a new name, and be – be included in this world in which he feels like he truly belongs. And then ...

Bonnie

And then ...

Angourie

And then ... And then he is given more power than he has ever had in his whole life. And it goes straight to his head. So with this gem he is given the power to do what he wishes. And his first wish – do you want to talk about his first wish?

Bonnie

Is it to be handsome?

Angourie

Yes.

Bonnie

Yeah. His first wish, before he, you know, he's there to save the world, like, he has things to do, places to go. And his first wish is he changes his physical appearance. The first few things he does is just completely decimate the character we knew. He takes away his physical appearance, he makes himself strong, and with each wish he makes, he forgets a part of who he was before. Each wish costs a memory, and so very quickly he becomes a completely different character. I found that loss really hard, 'cause it's like, we've spent a long time sympathising with a character, and now he has the same name, but he has none of the same traits, at all. He's completely different.

Angourie

I think he becomes the bullies that he was running away from at the start of the book.

[Intermission music]

Angourie

After stabbing Atreyu ... Oh, my god ... Um, he kind of has this realisation where he thinks, "Oh, maybe I was not a good leader, maybe I sucked, and maybe I need to stop." And he

buries his sword, he banishes his army, he doesn't want anything to do with them. And he begins this journey all by himself. And when I was reading it – here's my theory. Tell me if this is crazy. So, my theory is that once Bastian has – kind of begins this journey alone to go back home, he is kind of born again. And he goes through the stages of growing up. So previously, his wishes were to be the most powerful in all Fantastica, to be the strongest, to be admired, to be Emperor. And then his new wishes that start forming ... His first wish is to be a part of a group and he wants a sense of belonging. He's been alone for so long now and he wants to belong. And then from that, he actually wants a unique identity, and he feels that he no longer – he wants to feel included but he wants to feel included for who he is and how different he is to everyone else. And then finally he wants to feel loved. And once he receives that wish and he's loved by someone, he realises "that's not enough, I actually want to be able to love someone myself." So you see him lose everything from the Bastian that we knew, and then he builds it all back up again.

Bonnie

The first half of the second half, where, um, Bastian is becoming the hero he thinks he should be, which is, you know, handsome, powerful ... It's sort of a bit of a fable about, you know – I mean we'll talk about it later what makes a hero – but the second half is when he actually becomes a hero. He goes through all those steps of self-discovery, of an internal reflection, and places himself in the world where he needs to be rather than where he wants to be.

[Intermission music]

Bonnie

Let's talk about Atreyu, I love that guy. Atreyu is, like, the pinnacle of heroic. And so he's the chosen one. And I don't know if we ever get a reason for that, I mean he does a great job. Um, but yeah, so he's – he gets the gem, um, as Bastian does in the second half, but he never reads the inscription. And so the wishes he make[s] are – come from the truest place within him, because he doesn't know he's making them and he doesn't know he has the power to make them. So he's a hero in the true right because he's just acting on necessity, on instinct, on the desperate need to save The Childlike Empress, rather than the desperate need to be a hero.

Angourie

He doesn't abuse his power, and that's what makes a true hero; is knowing that you have the power, but using for good, and for the greater good. And he is my favourite.

[Intermission music]

Angourie

Shall we move onto ...

Bonnie

Our favourite –

Angourie

The wonder of them all ...

Bonnie

Yep –

Angourie

The Childlike Empress.

Bonnie

Yes! She's a ... a very interesting character. She resides in the Ivory Tower, she's the driving action of the story because everyone needs to protect her because without her, Fantastica can't survive. And the Nothing is – is taking over, and The Childlike Empress is dying, which is why Atreyu has to save her. And she's a tricky character because she's quote unquote "the leader" of Fantastica. Everyone looks up to her, everyone respects her. No one wishes any harm on her, really. But she has no judgement, she has no judgement between good or evil. She has no ability to feel emotions. She's just sort of ... blank. She's – she's nothing but idolised.

Angourie

And her blankness is also shown in the physical descriptions of her. Her hair is white, um, her skin is white, everything she wears is white. She lives in the Ivory Tower, she lives in a white magnolia flower. Everything about her is emotionless and devoid of passion. The Childlike Empress is actually not a leader. She is *the* leader but she's not *a* leader.

Bonnie

Yep. And as much as everyone respects her, and she is ... they need her alive, so that Fantastica can survive. She doesn't actually wield much power, because she refuses to make distinction, and to make any change, to have any power, you need to make some sort of distinction between one thing and another thing. I don't know whether we're supposed to think whether that is good and that is how leadership should be? Because it's like, obviously we see Bastian do it so wrong, but are we supposed to think The Childlike Empress is doing it right?

Angourie

Yeah, I think it's a really interesting idea and a really interesting question. And so, um ... you, the listener, let me know, ah, what you think. If you've read the book, or seen the movie, you can tweet me @angourierice and you can use the hashtag #thecommunitylibrary, and yeah, let me know what you think. I'd be really interested to know.

[Intermission music]

Angourie

Shall we move onto ... views and values?

Bonnie

Views and values!

Angourie

Themes and concerns!

So should we tackle book within a book first, because that makes my head hurt.

Bonnie

So obviously we have *The Neverending Story*. The book I'm holding is called *The Neverending Story*. Within this book, Atreyu reads *The Neverending Story* ...

Angourie

Little side-note from Angourie the editor here, I'm pretty sure Bonnie meant *Bastian* is reading *The Neverending Story*. Just to clarify. Okay, continue.

Bonnie

... which holds the world of Fantastica. Then within Fantastica – I don't remember what it's called – what's the place with all the writing?

Angourie

It's, ah, the Old Man of Wandering Mountain, and he lives in a massive egg.

[laughing]

Bonnie

And he basically is writing everything that has ever happened in history. And he – he's writing the story that is *The Neverending Story*, as in the book I'm holding, over and over and over again.

Angourie

And that includes the story of Bastian stealing the book, going to the attic, reading the book, following Atreyu's story, all of that.

Bonnie

Yeah, which implies that we, the reader, are also included in that story, I assumed. So there's a lot of layers, and I think it – it serves to, um, challenge our perception of what is real and what is not. And which book are we reading, where – where do we fit in within the world of *The Neverending Story*?

Angourie

Mm. I've never read any other book that has quite engaged me like this one.

Bonnie

Yeah –

Angourie

It actually physically included me in the story, and I think that is such an amazing thing. And for any kids reading it, I think that's an ... It's so wonderful, and it's really, really beautiful to say: "You are also part of this story, I am writing about you, not only *for* you, but *about* you, this is also your story". And I think that is actually a really wonderful message to send.

Bonnie

I agree. And the – the fact that, I mean, there is some question on, sort of, ownership and whether there, like – is everything already written out for us, do we have free will? It teaches us that we do have ownership over the wishes we make, and the decisions we choose to make. And that is part of something greater than us, and that is important.

[Intermission music]

Angourie

Shall we move onto connections across the worlds? When Bastian, like, comes across – he's – he – he comes across some group of people, and they're singing a song, and the song is written: "*When I was a little boy, with a hey, ho, the wind and the rain.*" This is a line from *Twelfth Night*, and I only know this – which is a Shakespeare play – and I only know this because we studied it last year in lit. Um, and I actually didn't finish reading it, but –

Bonnie

No, me neither – [laughs]

Angourie

[laughs] I watched the movie – don't tell my lit teacher – but, I, I um – so I recognise that, and I was – and then, and *then* the thing that killed me was they said: "Oh yeah, this song, um, it was written by some other human that came to Fantastica ages ago, someone called Shexper." And I was just – I ... I laughed really hard. Shexper spelt S-H-E-X-P-E-R. Shexper.

Bonnie

[laughs]

Angourie

And I thought it was very funny, I really liked that. And loved how it crossed between worlds.

Bonnie

Yeah, but I loved that it – it canonises Fantastica. Yeah, and I – I do love that it never stops being intertwined, even when, in the second half of the book we're just in Fantastica, there's no – we're the only link to reality, I love that there are little callouts to: "Hey, we know your world exists!"

[Intermission music]

Angourie

How Bastian first comes into the world I thought that was really interesting. In the first half of the book he slowly breaks down these barriers with various senses. The way I broke it down was that the first sense is that he feels. He feels like Atreyu, he sympathises, maybe even empathises with him. And then he comes to sight. So Atreyu actually sees Bastian in a mirror, um, and so that's the second barrier. And then another one is sound.

Bonnie

Yeah –

Angourie

So Bastian screams, and they hear it in their world.

Bonnie

Yeah, and he reads it and is like: “Wait, how’d they hear me!” [laughs]

Angourie

[laughs] There are lots of ways to connect with a story, and I feel that as well, because when you first jump into a book, when you’re reading it, you feel, um, you empathise with the characters, and then maybe you gasp out loud, you’re like: “Oh my god, I can’t believe that happened!” And you might see them in your mind’s eye, so I – I really like how he connected breaking down the barriers to getting to Fantastica with just, how people interact with stories anyway. And I – I liked that.

Bonnie

Again, it – it places that question of who are we in relation to the story. And I like that even as – I mean, I’m seventeen, I’m not the oldest person in the world – but, even so it is like the: “Maybe I can go into the story”. That that little sense of fantasy and childlike imagination of like: “Well, maybe there’s a chance they can hear me”. It’s a nice feeling to feel included in something, even if your logic brain is like: “It’s a book”. Like, it’s nice to be like: “What if it *isn’t* a book!”

[Intermission music]

Angourie

Should we move onto being a hero, and what that means in Fantastica and for Bastian and Atreyu?

Bonnie

Obviously we see this idealistic version of a hero in the first half, with Atreyu, like he’s the perfect hero. He’s great, we love him, he doesn’t do anything wrong, like everything goes wonderfully. We expect Bastian to follow the same journey. We are taught this one trajectory for “hero”, and if you’re given the title of “hero” you *must* be heroic. If you have the gem you *must* be heroic. Atreyu is the hero and then Bastian’s the anti-hero. The first half we’re seeing through Bastian’s eyes, but we’re reading the book, so we’re kind of in Atreyu, and then the second half we’re in Bastian, we’re getting his thought process. Like, we’re in his perspective, and although we can see Atreyu, like, trying to fix things. And it’s an interesting journey for a reader to go on these very, very similar journeys through Atreyu and then through Bastian, like it really does follow the same beats. It’s hard to look at someone who should be a hero as a villain, because he does become a villain, but he thinks he’s a hero and it – a lot of other people think he’s a hero as well. And I think it’s a good lesson in, like, not taking things at face value, and being like: just because you’re called a hero, you actually have to look at your actions and the way you carry yourself, and the – the

reason why you're doing the things you're doing to be able to call you a hero. It's not just in the title.

[Intermission music]

Angourie

We have these two heroes, Atreyu and Bastian. And if we accept the theory that Atreyu is the perfect hero, and Bastian is the perfect villain, or the perfect failing hero ... So would you go as far to say that in *Fantastica*, everything is either good or bad? Or do you think it's slightly mixed in?

Bonnie

I don't think Bastian is pure evil, and I think he does reconcile. But I *do* think Atreyu is a very pure kind of good, like he doesn't really do anything wrong, and he's always acting altruistically and he's always – he's a *very* heroic hero.

Angourie

So do you think that Bastian's ability to realise that he has done something wrong, and to actually change himself as a person, is what makes him human? Because everything else in *Fantastica* follows tradition, follows their story ... Atreyu is the perfect hero, The Childlike Empress is the perfect leader, *Fantastica* includes pure good and pure evil, and Bastian – what makes Bastian human is that he is somewhere in between.

Bonnie

Yeah, I think so.

[Intermission music]

Angourie

Something that is really prevalent in this book is the power of naming things.

Bonnie

The importance of giving The Childlike Empress a name so that she can survive, and so that, in turn, *Fantastica* can survive ... Because a human has to do it, I take that as it needs to be somehow linked to reality to exist, and the way to do that is by giving it a name.

Angourie

The Childlike Empress is one of the only characters who uses a name that we understand, and it's a combination of words in English that mean something else, and together they give her her identity.

The first quest of the book is the quest to rename her. She actually never gets a name. She gets a title. She gets *The* Childlike Empress, *The* Golden-Eyed Commander of Wishes, Moonchild. That's a title. She's – she's still branded as a child, a person, a leader. She doesn't actually have her own identity.

Bonnie.

Yeah, and I think – I think it's hard because I don't think she could have her own identity because she's, just the medium. Yeah, I – like, it's hard to describe her because she's so conceptual. Because if you give her a name that is accessible, does that destroy what she stands for by making her *too* specific?

Angourie

She is an idea in a corporeal form. She's an abstract idea made tangible, and that doesn't always translate.

[Intermission music]

Angourie

Let's move on to Prejudice and prejudice. In this segment we will talk about everything that people might be prejudiced against, marginalised groups and how that is represented in the story, and in particular, in *Fantastica*, a world that the author has created.

The main thing that I found was body image.

Bonnie

Yes –

Angourie

Do we want to talk about that?

Bonnie

I'd love to talk about body image. Um, so, Atreyu is like a – he's a warrior, he's a muscly little boy – [laughs] You know, he's that buff hero –

Angourie

Buff twelve-year-old – [laughs]

Bonnie

Buff twelve-year-old to be fair! [laughs] Um, but then we have Bastian who's like, this chubby little unathletic boy. The first thing he does is change his physical appearance to change himself and look more like the hero he wants to be.

Angourie

It immediately gives the audience the idea that in order to be a hero, you must be fit, and strong, and muscly, and a man, and that is a concept – that is not a new concept –

Bonnie

No –

Angourie

That has been around forever. When he changes himself to be what he thinks is a hero, what do you think it says about body image when he actually fails in that body?

Bonnie

Yeah, I think it's actually quite nice. Because obviously the first things he changes are the things he is insecure about – are the things that have made his life hard, which is – that's a fair thing to do. If I got magical powers, like I'd take away everything that makes my life difficult, like – [laughs]

There's no representation in *The Neverending Story* that he reads, of anyone who looks like him, any hero who is anything like him. And although he identifies with Atreyu, the main differences between him and Atreyu is the physical ones.

The fact that he fails is important, because those wishes that he made to be strong, to be handsome, actually took away the parts of him that, maybe were needed for him to be heroic.

Angourie

Do you think that Michael Ende is telling us: "You're perfect the way you are"? Or that heroes who are strong are shallow? Or maybe that changing your appearance actually changes who you are?

Bonnie

I think the ... the last one is the closest to what I believe. Because I think Atreyu is a great hero, and he has that sort of, athletic body, so I don't think he's saying that all athletic-bodied heroes are shallow. And I'm – I'm not sure he's even saying that we're perfect the way we are. Maybe physically – because I still think Bastian – he has a lot to learn when he enters Fantastica.

But yeah, I think it's more about the fact that maybe that's not the most necessary change you have to make to yourself, and those superficial ... "Superficial" things are, maybe, not the most important. I think that's the message that I took.

Angourie

What's most important is harnessing what you're good at and projecting that into the world in a really positive way.

[Intermission music]

Angourie

Should we talk about race in Fantastica? So when we first meet Atreyu, he is from a species of people in Fantastica who are called the Grass People, or the Greenskins, and they are hunters, and they hunt purple buffalos. Bastian says while he's reading the book he imagined a Native American person. It was quite obvious to me in the book that the Grass People's culture is very reminiscent of Native American culture, or some parts of that. If we are to assume that Atreyu is in some way representative of a Native American culture, as soon as the assumed white hero comes into the story, Atreyu is no longer the hero story that we're following.

Bonnie

Even in the first half of the book, we're following Atreyu's story through the eyes of Bastian, through the white male lens, rather than: this is Atreyu's story.

Angourie

So even though racism that exists in the human world doesn't carry over into the story of *Fantastica*, or its worldbuilding, it can be assumed that Michael Ende carried over his prejudices and his racism inadvertently into the way that he told the story, because it still is from the perspective of a white boy whose story is treated with more importance. If anybody else has read the book or seen the movie, and has, um, more arguments or interesting topics to do with this, I'd be really interested to read about it, so let me know.

[Intermission music]

Angourie

This segment is where we ask ourselves: feminist or nah?

Bonnie

[laughs] Nah.

Angourie

Nah. Sorry ...

Bonnie

Yeah [laughs]

There's nothing in the novel that is *actively* feminist. It's not a feminist manifesto, you know. We're following a white male character through his journey of self-discovery. There aren't many female characters – it wouldn't pass the Bechdel test. There are a couple wives. There's like, the annoying wife of the gnome. So we still have these gender – gender binaries, even within *Fantastica*.

Angourie

So Atreyu discovers these two people living together, we assume that they're husband and wife – or they're in a romantic relationship, or a relationship of some kind – and they live on the edge of the three gates, um, and Atreyu has to go through the three gates to discover more about his quest. So, he stays with them for a little while. They both assume these very specific roles. The woman is the carer, she is the doctor. And the man is the professor, and he is researching the three gates and what might be beyond them. And his life's work is dedicated to research, whereas her life's work is dedicated to practice and caring. Research – and specifically male research – is deemed more valuable in our world than caring – and specifically female carers, and the practice of caring.

Bonnie

The – the male is given the time and space to go on his own journey, and his own seemingly fruitless investigation of this thing. Like, he's allowed to just go and investigate this thing that no one really cares about and is just his, you know, his passion project, while the woman has to, you know, she – she has to work hard, she has to follow the rules, she has to take care of him, because he's not taking care of himself. Again we see male characters getting the freedom to experiment, and female characters having to work so hard just to be taken seriously by following the rules. Yeah –

Angourie

I could be reading too much into these side characters –

Bonnie

No such thing!

[Intermission music]

Angourie

And then The Childlike Empress! And we touched this before ... While she is a woman, and she is a woman that has power, and is a leadership position, which is actually something we don't see that often in fantasy novels. But at the same time, and we talked about this before, she doesn't have an identity. She's not a person, she's an idea.

Bonnie

She is projected upon by the male characters. We only really hear about her through their eyes, and there's always; "Oh, she's so beautiful", and how, you know, perfect she is, and pure she is. But we never get to know anything about her because she is nothing more than what we see through the male gaze.

Angourie

I would also argue that in this book, more than in any other one I've read, this woman is described as an object, because she's not given an identity, she's not given a journey herself. She actually is an object or an idea, for everyone to, um, respect and look at and fall in love with, but she's not actually a real person. I think it's quite an important fact that her name and her identity is grounded in Bastian. The story that we get is that this young white male gives her name, and determines her identity for her.

So, nah.

Bonnie

Yeah, nah. Sorry.

Angourie

Sorry.

[Intermission music]

Angourie

Any final thoughts? What do you think you learnt from this book?

Bonnie

I ... I do think I came away with a: "read more kids' books". Kids' books are great, and I think it was really nice [to] just read a book meant for children, even though it's really heavy, and dark and full on. I loved that. And also just the – the importance of stories, and of reading, and of enriching ourselves, especially in our crazy social media world. I think that hit home for me. That was like my big takeaway, was like, even if the story's about an arsehole named Bastian, maybe it's still worth reading.

Angourie

Oh, that's so nice.

[Intermission music]

Angourie

And finally: final rating out of five.

Bonnie

Yeah, I've been thinking about this the whole time ... and I think I'm gonna give it ... Oh, it's so hard! I'm gonna do it out of ten, okay? Bold –

Angourie

No!

Bonnie

No, I'm changing the rating – I can't – out of five's too hard, I'm doing it out of ten. I'm going to give it a 7.6 out of ten.

Angourie

Woah, okay.

Bonnie

I know – maybe I regret that –

Angourie

You just – shook up the rules so much. Can I just say, that in my notes it says: final rating out of 5. And I warned you – [laughs]

Bonnie

It doesn't say that in my notes! [laughs]

Angourie

Um, I'm gonna do my final rating out of five, because I stick to the rules. And mine is ... 3.75, which makes more sense than 7.6.

Bonnie

Absolutely not.

Angourie

So there you have it, our final ratings. I'm sure someone, ah, who did maths in high school [coughs] not me – can figure out your rating out of five and my rating out of ten.

[Ukulele theme music]

Angourie

Thank you so much for listening! If you enjoyed it, you can subscribe on iTunes so you never miss an episode. You can also rate and review on your podcast platform of choice, and you can follow the community library on Instagram @the_community_library. You can also use the hashtag #thecommunitylibrary on Instagram and twitter. Thank you so much for listening! Next episode, I'll be sitting down with a different guest and we will be discussing *Pulp* by Robin Talley, and I encourage you all to read along! And ... thanks for hanging out with me, Bonnie!

Bonnie

Ah, anytime, Angourie, I love reading a good book.

Angourie

Thanks so much, we'll see you next time. Bye!

[Ukulele theme music]

Bonnie

I wish I was called The Many Coloured Death. Honestly, that is a formidable title. [laughs]

Angourie

Wait let me just check if we're still recording ... yes!

Bonnie

Oh, we love that.

Bonnie

What's this – what are ...?

Angourie

Eyes?

Bonnie

Eyes! [laughs] No like – visual! Visual. Visual is the word – I was like, aural? That's ears.

Bonnie

It's a bresh of fresh air. Br- bresh? Breath?

Angourie

A bresh of fresh air! [laughs]

Bonnie

Shut up! [laughs] It's a *breath* of fresh air.

Bonnie

Wait you have to delete me doing bad maths! [laughs]