

## Episode 1.10 Books Featuring Plays

### 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 pay my respect to Elders past, present and future.

[ukulele theme music]

### Angourie (host)

Hello and welcome to The Community Library: a podcast, book club and discussion space. I'm your host, Angourie Rice.

Happy tenth episode! Yay! Unfortunately I'm feeling a little under the weather ... Ah I've just been sniffing and – and sneezing and it's been unpleasant, ah, so it's kinda bad timing for me to be sick on my tenth episode, but, hey, we can celebrate quietly.

This week I am excited to bring you an episode all about books featuring plays. And I'm gonna get into that a bit later, but first I want to tell you about what I'm currently reading.

I am comforting myself with some really nice comfort reads. So first up, I finally finished *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*! ["Yay" sound effect] It's been a long time coming. It took me about two months to finish that book in German. So I'm glad that that's done. But, you know, again, it's sad that it's over 'cause that is my favourite book of the series. But now, I've moved on to *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*. And this is where, like, I really forget what happened in the story. I haven't read these last two books in such a long time, and I've forgotten all those tiny little details that didn't make it into the film. So I'm really excited to be reading this again. I'm reading the new Bloomsbury paperback edition. This isn't the adult edition, this is the – the kids or the teens edition, so it has all of those font changes that I love. Like, Dumbledore's handwriting and the Daily Prophet press font. Ah, so I'm really enjoying that. Um, I'm a sucker for font changes. I'm a hundred pages in, but it feels like I haven't even made a dent in it, 'cause they haven't arrived at Hogwarts yet. This book is insanely huge, but not as big as the last one, so hopefully I'll finish it a lot quicker.

The other book that I'm currently reading is called *Ronia, the Robber's Daughter* by Astrid Lindgren. This is one of my sister's favourite, favourite books of all time, and she really, really wanted me to read it, so I have started to read it because she was not shutting up about it. And I am really enjoying it so far. It's funny, 'cause I know the cover so well because my sister always had it, like, beside her bed. You know, she was always reading it on the go, like, she loved it so much. So it's funny that I recognise the exterior but I don't know anything about the story. It's about a girl and she's the daughter of a robber ... obviously – and she meets a boy who's the son of the rival robber gang, and they kind of become friends, but not really, and it's about her journeys and adventures. I don't really know, 'cause I've only just started it, but it's very, very short, so hopefully I'll get through this quickly, and it's also a nice comfort read. It's – it's really – it's a really cute one so far, so it's making me feel a little better.

As always, please let me know what you're currently reading, if you're enjoying it, if you're not enjoying it. You can tweet me @angourierice, or you can message The Community Library on Instagram @the\_community\_library.

[transition music]

## Angourie

This week on Instagram I asked you what kind of episode you would like to listen to.

@aubreyjdickens on Instagram suggested: “Maybe discuss a certain genre, or discuss a favourite book recommendations of all time.” So I’ve kind of taken on this suggestion and changed it a little bit. So this week, my discussion topic for the minisode is books featuring plays. I wouldn’t say that books featuring plays are a certain genre, but I’m recommending, or talking about books under a certain theme, very similar to my books about female friendships episode that I did with Bonnie. I was also inspired to make this episode by a booktuber that I watch called Lala; she has a channel called booksandlala. She has a series of videos that are overly specific book recommendations. So she did one on books about camping, she did one on books about space but not set in space. And she does these really, really specific ones which I really like. I think that’s so interesting, and I was thinking: “Oh, so what is something really specific that I like in books?” And it is when books feature a play.

I think I realised that I really love books about plays late last year when I read *Mansfield Park* by Jane Austen. This is one of the books on the list, so I’m not gonna talk about it much here, I’ll talk about it a bit later. But there is a play in this book, and I remember thinking: “Oh, that’s so cool!” I love it when a story and performance-based artform is explored in a story. It’s like what we spoke about in *The Neverending Story Episode* where it’s like a book within a book. It’s a play within a book, it’s performance and storytelling within storytelling, which I love.

I think the reason that I love books about plays – possibly even more than I love books about books – is that the characters interact with it while interacting with each other, because it’s performance-based. Whereas if you have a book about books; reading a book is a very solo activity. You see how one character feels about a book, but it’s hard for them to interact with another character about that. In a play, it’s all about collaboration, it’s all about the dynamics between the characters, and it’s all about these fictional characters playing fictional characters, and seeing how that influences their story. I love that plays within books create two levels of story, because you have the main story, which is considered the real world, but it’s still fiction, and then on top of that you have the fictional world within the fictional world. I think plays can be used as a very creative literary device where the lives of the characters start to imitate the play, or the play is a commentary on the characters and they don’t know it, so it’s dramatic irony. Or, it can be used as a catalyst for events in the play. It could create tension and drama, it could start a love story. So I love that the event of storytelling within a story affects the story. Does that even make sense? Who knows, you get what I mean!

[transition music]

So I have six books that I want to talk about today that all feature plays, and one of them is actually a play that features a play, but I’ll get to that later. The first book that I want to talk about is *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott. *Little Women* follows four sisters: Meg, Jo, Beth and Amy during the civil war era in America, and their father is away at war and they’re quite poor, and they live with their mother and their housekeeper. It’s about their sister dynamics, and the stuff that they get up to, and their neighbour who is really cute. It’s a slice of life story looking at these four girls and how they grow up. I really love this book. I haven’t read it in a while, though, I think it might be time for me to re-read it, especially ’cause I got a new edition of it. It’s the Puffin in Bloom edition, which is really, really beautiful. It’s got all these flowers on it, it’s just gorgeous, gorgeous. This book starts

out when the girls are quite young, they're all living at home, and the second-oldest daughter, Jo, is kind of a tomboy. She's more out there, she's outgoing, she's adventurous, and she's a writer, and so she's written a play – or she's in the process of writing a play for all of her sisters to perform. And through this play, we get to explore the sisters and their dynamics, and how they interact with one another. And I love how while they're rehearsing the play, it brings out certain qualities in them.

The play is also a point of tension, and creates a lot of drama in the household, and I really like that. Um, I love those two levels of stories and how, for Jo, as well, who writes the play – she plays a boy in the play, and for her, it's kind of this release of getting to be everything that she's not allowed to be in society. I love how storytelling and performance allows her to do that.

The play also sets up Jo's character really well, because later in the book she becomes a writer. We see her start writing more stories, different stories, we see how they're received, we see how critics tell her to write what she knows. This play is the starting point for her writing career, her writing journey, and her journey in learning how to tell stories. And I think that it's a really important part of the book, and it's so great that it's storytelling within storytelling. I just, I love that.

The next book that I want to talk about is actually a play, and it's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare. I have seen I think two productions of this play? Ah, one more recently, and so I remember it quite a bit. Also, if you've seen the movie *Strange Magic*, which is an animated movie about fairies, that is an adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Recently I read the play, just because I have it on my bookshelf, and I have a really beautiful illustrated edition. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is one of Shakespeare's comedies, and it has three strands to the story. The first one follows two men and two women who are in this, kind of, love triangle that becomes a love square. They run into the woods to elope, and one of them follows the other and – anyway, they all end up in the woods on this midsummer night. They all fall asleep and some magic happens, and then the love triangle becomes a love square, and it's all confusing about who loves who, and who's supposed to end up with who. Meanwhile, we're also following the King and Queen of the fairies who live in the forest, and they are fighting, and so they get up to lots of pranks and hijinks because they're fighting with one another. Meanwhile, we're also following a group of local tradesmen called the Mechanicals, who are putting on a play. They're going to put on a play for the lovers and their parents at their parents' wedding.

So, the role of the play in this play is – that's a funny sentence ... The role of the play is for comic relief, it's absurd. It's supposed to be the most terrible play ever, and that makes it funny. And the story of the play is very, very similar to that of *Romeo and Juliet*. So, it follows Pyramus and Thisbe, who are in love but kept apart by their families. They go into the forest, and Pyramus believes that Thisbe has been killed by a lion, so he kills himself. And then Thisbe comes along and sees that Pyramus has killed himself, and so she kills herself as well. Sound familiar, right? So it's supposed to be this tragic love story, but because it's performed by a bunch of amateur actors who are really just there for comic relief, it's absurd, and it's a farce.

You can probably read lots and lots and lots about the symbolism of the play within a play and what it means. I didn't study this at school, I just read it in my own time, so I understood maybe thirty percent of the whole thing. But, what I loved about it is that it's a play within a play, and at the very end, the audience is put into this weird place of being not the only audience there, because they're watching the audience in the play, and the audience in the play is watching the play within the play. And I just love how we have those two layers of storytelling.

So the play happens at the very end of the play, and it happens after all the couples have gotten together and everyone's happy. So we have just seen this absurd, magical story, and then those

characters sit down and witness a play that they think is ridiculous and weird and absurd. They think that that's the weirdest thing that's happened to them all night. And we, as the audience, know that that's not.

So now that we've just been in 1600s England, we're gonna come all the way back to present day, and I'm gonna to talk about a graphic novel called *Drama* by Raina Telgemeier. This is a middle-grade graphic novel, and it centres around a girl called Callie who is the set designer for her school play. I really enjoyed this when I first read it, I thought it was fun. It was a really quick read, but it was really cute as well.

What I liked about it was that it has both onstage and offstage drama. We see the story through the perspective of someone who is behind the scenes the whole time. You know, she's the set designer, she's creating scenery, so she isn't a part of the drama onstage, but it still means that there's gonna be drama in her life. I just really like how the whole story and the world is framed by this school play, because it's something we can all relate to, you know, putting on the school production. And it's a really fun, quick read.

My next book is *The Man Who Loved Children* by Christina Stead. Now this is a very big book – it's about 500 pages long, and the play only features in a very small section, but I still want to talk about it 'cause I think it's really important – it's a really important part of the story. And it's a great book. So, *The Man Who Loved Children* follows a husband and wife: Sam and Henny, and their six children as they navigate poverty, and relationships, and drama within the family. It's a very insular family drama, and it's a character study, really, and these characters are incredible. And I studied this book – ah – in literature class at school, and I loved it, I thought it was brilliant.

One of the main themes in this book is language and the power of language. The father in the story, Sam, he controls his children with language, and he's created this weird kind of baby talk, and creates nicknames for things that only he and his children understand, and in that way he closes his children off from the rest of the world, and he essentially controls them. So, in the book, language is the currency of power.

His eldest daughter, Louie, is the only child from his previous marriage, and she's the oldest, and so she's always picked on, and she's going through puberty, and she is really going through a rough time. He's just awful to her and he manipulates her, and he shows his power by conquering language, and by excluding her with language, and giving her nicknames that she doesn't like. So right from the beginning, language is established as the ruler of the household, and because the father owns the language, he is the ruler of the household.

As the story progresses and Louie gets older, she starts writing. She starts getting into writing because she wants to take control of this language, and she wants to become an actress, and her dad always tells her: "You're too fat, you're too ugly, you will never be a performer, everyone will just laugh at you." So she starts writing plays. And then for his birthday, she writes a very special play. This play is in a made up language. So, she gets her younger brother and sister to perform this play for her dad on his birthday, and the whole time he's sitting there saying: "I don't get it, I don't understand, it's in some other language, this is stupid, it's ridiculous." His immediate response really shows how uncomfortable he is made by not understanding something, and she purposefully has created something that is for him, but also excludes him. And so, in doing so, she takes this power back, and she does that through the form of a play, which I love. I think plays are a combination of language and performance, and by combining those two, she excludes her father, and she takes that power back, because she takes back that language. And through the

performance of him not being able to understand it, she puts him in a position where he feels powerless. And I love that the play actually does that to him.

So, even though I've kind of, um, given away parts of this book, I won't tell you what the play is about, because that is also really, really important to the story, because I would really love for you to pick up this book and read it. It's heavy, it's serious, ah, but it's incredible. I want more and more people to read it 'cause I just wanna talk about it all the time 'cause I love it so much.

The next book that I want to talk about is *Ballet Shoes* by Noel Streatfeild. This is a book from my childhood, which I loved. My mum read it to me and my sister and then I would read it by myself over and over again 'cause I just loved it so much. This follows three adopted sisters: Pauline, Petrova and Posy. They're living in London, and they're all going to a ballet school. And we soon realise that Posy is the most naturally talented at ballet, Pauline wants to become an actress, and Petrova would much rather fly a plane or fix cars. So we have three sisters who are all involved in performing arts. We follow them as they grow up and realise their dreams, and follow their dreams. It's a really, really beautiful book – I really wanna re-read it, I haven't read it in a while. So, there are multiple performances and plays in *Ballet Shoes*, and what I love about the story is that it's framed by these performances, and they're catalysts for the drama. I love that the plays create this atmosphere of excitement and glamour. For me, at least, reading a story about performances conjures up so many memories, and a very specific atmosphere as well, you know? The darkness of hiding behind the wings, or waiting backstage, or the musty, like, dustiness of the theatre – and the smell of a theatre when you just walk in, and the emptiness of it before you put on the performance, and then suddenly you walk out onto that stage and a whole story is created, just out of nothing. I love that atmosphere of performance, and I love that that is what frames the whole story of *Ballet Shoes*.

The very last book that I'm gonna talk about is the one that I mentioned at the beginning, which is *Mansfield Park* by Jane Austen. *Mansfield Park* follows Fanny Price, and she goes to live with her rich cousins, the Bertrams. So, she's left her home, she's left her ten siblings, and she's very poor, but now she's gone to live with her rich family. And obviously drama ensues. So along with her rich cousins, some friends move in called Henry and Mary Crawford. And Henry comes up with the idea to put on a play, and this causes a lot of tension in the household, especially because they know that their father, the General, is away, and he would not approve of a play. But they decide to put it on anyway, 'cause they just wanna make a play so much.

The play in this is a catalyst for a lot of the drama that happens. But it also creates kind of a parallel with the couples and the lovers. It's actually through the play that Fanny Price realises her love and her feelings for someone, because she reads all of the saucy scenes that he has to do with someone else, and she feels jealous and upset about it. She also feels that she wants to be the one to say those things to him in the play, because that's how she really feels.

I love when art is a way for characters to say things that they don't know how to say. It creates a deeper meaning in a scene, and I love that it's all under the guise of being all pretend, and that makes it easy to brush it off if you get hurt, because it was all pretend and it wasn't real anyway. But, you do feel real emotions in that moment, and I love how that is represented in *Mansfield Park*.

[transition music]

So those are all the books that I could think of that include plays. There were a few others that I haven't read in a while, so I didn't wanna talk about them 'cause I didn't really remember. But, if you know any books that feature plays, please tell me about them, I would love to read them. You can tweet me @angourierice, or you can message me on Instagram @the\_community\_library. Also let me know if you enjoyed this kind of minisode, where I talk about books that are very specific that I really like. I know that I really like watching Lala's videos where she gives very specific book recommendations, but let me know if you do. I don't know – you might not, ah ... but I had fun! And that's the most important thing, right?

Next week I will be talking about *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, so if you haven't read it yet, you still have a week. It's very short – I will link free audiobooks in the show notes, so you can go and listen to those, they're only about an hour to two hours long. I have faith that you can read it really quickly, if you want to. It's really fun, it's a very light read, but there's a lot to talk about! So, read along if you haven't already, and then we can talk about it together.

I would also like to take the time now to say thank you so much for the lovely messages that I got about the last episode, um, which was on Taylor Swift and Robert Browning.

@peter\_holmes\_the16th sent a really lovely message saying that, and I quote: "As someone who loves reading but sucked at English in high school, it's really nice to enjoy literature and pull it apart in a literary sense. Especially using a mix of popular culture with "classical" literature." End quote. It just made me really happy to read that, because I think that the high school education method of talking about literature and English, ah, can be really alienating sometimes, and I definitely felt that sometimes, so it's really nice to know that someone enjoyed the podcast 'cause it related it back to popular culture today. I had so much fun recording the episode, so it made me so happy to see that someone really enjoyed it and took the time to message, so thank you, @peter\_holmes\_the16th. I also wanna thank @wilma.stb on Instagram, who sent a really nice message. English is not her first language, and she was really lovely in saying that I talk not too fast and clearly so that it helps her understand, which is great, and that's awesome, and it makes me so, so happy, so thank you for messaging. She also asked if I have any recommendations for a book with an interesting plot that is not written in difficult English. For that, I would recommend any of the Jacqueline Wilson books, because the language is quite simple but the stories are really interesting and beautiful, and I loved Jacqueline Wilson growing up. Another thing that I do when looking for books to read in German, is reading something that I've already read in English. So, I know the plot, I know what's going to happen, and if I need help with the translation, then I can look back at my English copy and find out what something means. Thank you so much to everyone who sent very lovely messages, it's really nice and I'm so happy that people are enjoying the podcast, so thank you.

[ukulele theme music]

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