

3.14 Catching Teller Crow: Review and Discussion

Angourie [host]

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge that this work was developed and presented on the unceded territory of the Lenape people. I wish to pay my respects to Elders past, present, and emerging.

[fade in: plucky theme music with clarinet, piano and twinkly triangle]

Angourie [host]

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

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Angourie [host]

The end of another month is upon us, dear listeners! Time really has flown by, at least it has for me. This week has been my first full week back in America, and I must admit, I'm still kind of getting over jet lag. When I recorded last week's episode, I had just arrived in the States, and I was so zombie-like I don't even really remember what I said! But I am feeling much more human today, and I'm getting into the swing of things in America. This month on the podcast, the theme is Australian literature, which is kinda funny considering I'm now on the other side of the world. But, I also think it's oddly fitting. Um, you know, it's nice to have a change from the same four walls that I've been stuck in in Australia during lockdown, but of course, I still really miss home. So, chatting to you about Australian books is kind of an antidote to homesickness. This week we're discussing our book club pick, *Catching Teller Crow* by Ambelin Kwaymullina and Ezekiel Kwaymullina. If you read this book in the US, you might also know it under its alternate title: *The Things She's Seen*. This is going to be a spoiler-free discussion, so if you haven't read the book, you're safe to listen! So, let's talk about *Catching Teller Crow*.

I found out about this book when I was looking for new Aussie books to read, and I added it to my TBR at the same time as a bunch of other Aussie YA books. And so when I went to choose a book club pick for this month, I thought it would be a perfect choice to lead us into October, because it's a ghost story. Now, I know most of my listeners are from the US and UK, so I thought it would also be a nice cosy mystery ghost story to lead into the cooler months. Something else I wanted to consider when choosing a book for the Australian literature theme is the inclusion and celebration of First Nations voices. The First Peoples of Australia are the first story-tellers, and it's important to not only recognise that when talking about the Australian literary canon, but to also read these stories and talk about them.

Catching Teller Crow is by sister and brother duo, Ambelin Kwaymullina and Ezekiel Kwaymullina, and it was published in 2018. Ambelin and Ezekiel come from the Palyku people of the Pilbara region of Western Australia. This is their first novel they've written together, but Ambelin

Kwaymullina has written other YA novels, including a dystopian series called *The Tribe*. *Catching Teller Crow* won the Victorian Premier's Literary Award for YA Fiction in 2019, and the Aurealis Award for Best Young Adult Novel in 2018.

[fade in: high-pitched droning synth with deep bass tones, and echoey drums]

Nothing's been the same for Beth Teller since she died. Her dad, a detective, is the only one who can see and hear her – and he's drowning in grief. But now they have a mystery to solve together. Who is Isobel Catching, and what's her connection to the fire that killed a man? What happened to the people who haven't been seen since the fire? As Beth unravels the mystery, she finds a shocking story lurking beneath the surface of a small town, and a friendship that lasts beyond one life and into another. Told in two unforgettable voices, this gripping novel weaves together themes of grief, colonial history, violence, love and family.

[fade out: synth music]

I really loved this book, and I was so happy that I did! I think it's a perfectly well-rounded YA novel, with a healthy dose of mystery and emotion, and just a splash of fantasy. And it was also just a joy to listen to the audiobook, which is narrated by Miranda Tapsell. She is a wonderful Aussie actress and her narration was just so perfect for the story. This book just really hit the spot for me, and if you haven't read it, I highly, highly recommend you do.

But, to begin our discussion, I want to talk about how the story is constructed. We're following two perspectives here. The story begins in a small town, where Beth's dad has been sent from the city to work on a case of a children's home that has burnt down. And through trying to solve the mystery of the fire, Beth and her dad interview a key witness in the case, Isobel Catching. She's a girl who was walking through the bush the night the fire happened. And so as they interview her, we dip into a second story, into Isobel's story. So from her perspective, we get her recount of what happened to her leading up to when she was found walking near the fire. And this perspective reads almost like a dream with very vivid imagery and sparse prose. She talks about big winged beasts who come to take her away, a grey girl called Crow, and a monster who feeds on colours. And as the story goes on, Isobel's world begins to intertwine with Beth's, and we discover the key part she has to play in the mystery. Someone on Instagram asked if I think this could be turned into a movie, because of the two perspectives, and I definitely think so. I think this story would work really well in a visual medium, and I think they could adapt it for screen really effectively.

As I'm sure you know by now, I love stories within stories, and so this novel is no exception to that rule. Something I particularly loved about the construction of these two stories is how stylistically different they were. Beth's perspective with her dad reads like a very heart-felt, YA contemporary. You know, we've got themes of grief and tense family relationships, but also some oddly funny and sweet moments between the father and daughter. In contrast, Isobel's perspective is told in verse. Now, when I listened to the audiobook recording, I didn't realise this. Um, but someone on Instagram asked me about the use of verse and prose, so I did a bit more research on this and discovered yes, in fact, Isobel's perspective is told in verse. So, even though I didn't notice this when I was listening to it, I do think the effect of it being in verse comes through. Um, because this perspective is very dream-like and fantastical and atmospheric, but also almost reads like a speculative horror novel. And when these two stories connect, when Beth's story collides with

Isobel's story, it's so beautiful and special – but I'm not gonna give it away! I want you to read it. But I want to read out a section of the authors' note at the end, that talks more about the stories and experiences that informed this novel. They write, quote:

“In telling this tale, we were informed by two sets of stories that are the inheritance of Aboriginal peoples. The first set is stories of our homelands, families, cultures – the stories that speak to the connections that sustain us and that we sustain in turn. The second set is the tales that entered our worlds with colonization – stories of the violence that was terrifyingly chaotic or, even more terrifyingly, organised on a systemic scale. Both sets of stories inform our existences and, thus, our storytelling.”

End quote. I wanted to include this quote because I think it perfectly articulates how these two sets of stories are blended to make a very layered novel. And the way that these two sets of stories are represented in the book shows how connected they are, as well. And so when we talk about Isobel's more fantastical perspective vs. Beth's more grounded perspective – even though she's a ghost – I think this shows that there is more than one way to represent something. In *Catching Teller Crow*, both the quote-unquote “real-world” perspective and the quote-unquote “fantastical-world” perspective are representations of the truth. And this novel shows that neither interpretation of the truth is less valid than the other.

Another element to the novel that I really loved and that I want to talk about, is how the concept of time is represented. So parts of this novel are linear, and parts of it aren't, and this is something that was also addressed in the authors' note. Ambelin and Ezekiel Kwaymullina write, quote:

“Aboriginal stories also tell of a nonlinear world, one in which time does not run in a line from the past through the present and on into the future. All life is in constant motion, turning and rotating in relation to other life, and it is through these movements that the world shifts forward or back. [...] the journeys of [the characters] do not “advance” because days pass by, but because these characters are finding ways to heal.”

End quote. I think this is something that really comes through in the character development. Each of the characters reaches a point of transformation, but it's not necessarily reaching an end point to the story. And as the authors explain in their note, it's a moving, quote: “out of one cycle and into another.” End quote. So in my mind, I pictured the narrative almost like a Venn diagram, with each circle representing a character's journey. And where the circles intersected was where our story took place, but the beginning of the novel wasn't the beginning and the ending wasn't the ending. All we, as the readers, got to experience, was a slice of these characters' individual journeys. And I think the book crafted all these intersecting character arcs in a really beautiful way. Because none of the events in this novel happened in a vacuum, they were all influenced by pasts, presents and futures all coming together.

I want to talk a more about the characters. Let's start off with Beth, who is the hero of our story. She's young, she's about fourteen or fifteen, I think, and her perspective reads a lot younger than I thought it was going to, but her character voice is so distinct. She's a keen observer who just feels things very deeply – she's very all or nothing. And this means she sometimes runs away with her imagination and big ideas and theories, but it also means that she loves with her whole heart and nothing less. She reminded me a lot of Anne Shirley from *Anne of Green Gables*. I really loved her voice, even though it read younger than I expected. And my favourite part of this book, and something I didn't expect going into it, was Beth's relationship with her dad, Michael.

So Michael is dealing with the grief of Beth's death, but it's not something he is able to move on from, because she's still there, you know, talking to him. And Beth, in turn, feels personally responsible to try and help her dad move on. You know, she feels she needs to take care of him until she's sure that he will be okay. And this kind of push and pull is the central ... not even conflict, but rather tension of the book, because part of Beth knows that the only thing that will allow her dad to heal, is her saying goodbye forever. And it was really beautiful to read about such a precious father-daughter relationship, especially because I don't know how often I read about that. And speaking of Michael, you know, something I really loved about his character, is that he also went through a journey of self-discovery. And the reason I love this is because *Catching Teller Crow* is a coming-of-age story about teenage girls, but this forty-something-year-old-man is not exempt from going through a transformation. He has just as much to learn as Beth does, and I thought that was really beautiful. It acknowledged and showed that fully-grown adults also have things to learn and room to grow.

Isobel Catching was another important character in our story, as she provided the other perspective for us. Isobel is a little older than Beth, and from the first moment we meet her, it's clear that she's been through a lot. And because of this, she, unlike Beth, is more guarded in her emotions. But even though she's got kind of a prickly exterior, she's still a lovable and a very engaging character. Isobel's character and journey is heavily influenced by the intergenerational trauma that she suffers from the Stolen Generations.

The Stolen Generations was a very real thing that happened in history, and it refers to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children who were removed from their families by the Australian government. And this happened between 1910 and 1970. This forcible removal was made legal under the policy of "Assimilation". So most of these children were placed in institutions, and some were adopted by white families. The children who were separated were forbidden to speak their traditional language, they were forbidden to refer to themselves using the names given to them by their families, and they also couldn't contact their families in any way. The trauma and impacts of the Stolen Generations is still being felt in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities today.

This is an important part of Isobel's character because her great-grandmother, and her grandmother were both a part of the Stolen Generations. And Isobel carries this trauma with her. But by remembering the names of the Catching women in her family and reciting their names back to herself and remembering their stories, she is able to build her armour. This links into what I was talking about – how the way time is represented in this novel, how the past and future influence the present. And I'm sure you've also heard me mention that I love books that have themes of intergenerational love – especially when it talks about generations of women. And so through the character of Isobel, we really saw that theme come through, and this was something that I think the authors crafted perfectly.

Overall, I thought this was such a well-rounded, YA speculative novel, and I just want basically everyone to read it. To make some comparisons, if you're unsure about reading it, I think you'd like this if you like A. S. King's novels, or *Black Girl Unlimited* by Echo Brown, or *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez, this is definitely for you. But of course, it's also so hard to make comparisons with something like this, because it's such an Australian story. And it's really – and reading this really reminded me what I love about Australian literature, is that it's so unique. And

this book, especially, talks about connection to country, and plant life, and animals, and family. So if you're looking to read more Australian YA fiction, then this is a great place to start. It's a beautiful story of love and loss and trauma, and also transformation and how to let go. I do want to mention, however, that there are trigger warnings for sexual assault and violence, so be warned of that going in. I rated this book five out of five stars. And if you read along with me, I hope you liked it, and if you didn't read along with me, then I highly, highly recommend.

[fade in and out to indicate a break: high-pitched droning synth with deep bass tones, and echoey drums]

Even though it's the end of the month, it is not the end of our Aussie Literature theme! Because I had to shuffle some episodes around due to international travel and jetlag, our theme is carrying over into first episode in October. So next week it will be more of a vlog-style episode – if I can even, if that's even the right term, I don't know! But in it, I will take you along with me in reading a wide range of Australian fiction. So I'm reading an essay collection, a classic, a Miles Franklin Award-winner, and I've got a few more up my sleeve. So make sure you tune in to hear what I read and what I thought. And then after that episode, all October content will be spooky-scary-skeleton in the lead up to Halloween. So in the spirit of Halloween, our next book club pick is *The Trap* by Melanie Raabe. This is a mystery thriller novel about a well-known author who has become a recluse since the murder of her sister. After recognising the face of the murderer on television, the author decides to lure the murderer into a trap so she can avenge her sister's death. I'm really excited for this one, I think it's gonna be really mysterious and exciting, and also, you know, about books and writing, which I always love. So I will be discussing that on the 25th of October, so you have exactly one month to read it. I hope you read along with us, it's always way more fun if you do. As always, I will ask you on Instagram what you want me to discuss in the episode, so if you want your input, then make sure you're following @the_community_library.

[fade in: plucky theme music with clarinet, piano and twinkly triangle]

Thank you very much for listening, I hope you enjoyed. I love making this podcast for you, and it makes me so happy to know that people like to listen and also like to read good books along with me. So, truly, thank you. As always, you can follow me on Instagram @angourierice or you can follow @the_community_library. I hope you're all taking care of yourselves, staying safe and hopefully reading lots of good books. I'll talk to you next week. Bye.

[fade out: theme music]