

3.2 Good Vibes Only: 3 Positive Book Reviews

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 respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

[theme music]

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

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Welcome to Season 3, everyone! I hope you enjoyed last week's episode. Um, it was a bit different in style and tone, but I really enjoyed making it and I'm actually really proud of the end product. So, I hope to do more essay-like discussion episodes like that in future, so let me know if you want to hear them too, or what topics you'd like me to discuss! Um, you can always DM me on Instagram @the_community_library, or contact me through the blog.

So, I want to first off say thank you to Chris Romero on Instagram who sent me a really lovely message about my episode on J. K. Rowling. And I also got a really nice email from Tawfik Abedali, who said, quote: "The separation of art and the artist is complex, and I will need to reevaluate not only my stances on Harry Potter, but what else I read in order to continue to grow." And so that was just – oh, so wonderful for me to read, because it makes me feel less alone in this journey! Um, you know, we can all find other things to read together that are not *Harry Potter*. So, thank you to those people for your kind messages, um, they really made my day.

This week, I've been thinking a lot about things that I like, and things that make me happy. I'm currently living in Melbourne, and we have just been placed under another six weeks of stage 3 lockdown. This means we can only leave our houses for essential trips like grocery shopping or working for an essential service, or going out to exercise. Things were just beginning to open up here, so I think, um, the whole of Melbourne is a bit disappointed that everything has had to close down, but of course, you know, it's for the safety of our city and the community. I think in my household in particular, we've kind of just, like, lost the isolation motivation we had the first time round, so I'm trying to think about all the things that I love, and trying to do things that make me happy, like knitting and watching reality TV, and um, focussing on being positive and being kind to myself. So, wherever you are, um, whether you're in Melbourne, or Australia, or any other part of the world, I hope you are safe and healthy, and also seeking out things that make you happy. So, this week, in the spirit of staying positive and sharing positive vibes, ah, today I'm going to review three books I recently read and loved.

Before I get into it though, I want to tell you about this month's book club pick: *Clap When You Land* by Elizabeth Acevedo. I am really excited for this one, um, I read another of Acevedo's works, *The Poet X*, earlier this year and absolutely loved it, so I thought *Clap When You Land* would be a good choice. *Clap When You Land* is about two sisters, one of them lives in the Dominican Republic,

and the other lives in New York. Now, when their father dies in a plane crash, the two girls learn about each other's existence, and both must grapple with what this means for their families and their futures. It's a novel told in verse, so it's going to be quite a quick read, I think. I've just started the audiobook, and I highly recommend reading it that way, because Elizabeth Acevedo narrates it herself and the way she reads her own writing is incredible, cos you really get all the cadences in the poetry. I will be discussing this book with friend of the podcast and feminist extraordinaire Bonnie, on the 26th of July, so that's exactly two weeks from today. I'll also be asking you on Instagram for some questions and discussion topics on the book closer to the date, so please read along with us, it makes the discussion episode so much more fun if you do!

And now, onto the reviews!

Black Girl Unlimited by Echo Brown

Echo Brown is an American author, and *Black Girl Unlimited* is her debut novel. It was published in 2020 by Macmillan.

Our main character is Echo Brown: a wizard living on the East side, where the apartments are small and parents suffer from addictions to the white rocks. When Echo transfers to the rich school on the West Side, she must reconcile her new life with her old one. In this coming-of-age story, Echo discovers more and more magic in the world around her, and begins to realise that, though there is pain everywhere, she has the ability to conjure light. *Black Girl Unlimited* is a hard-hitting YA novel that explores racism, sexism, sexual violence and depression, but also the importance of empathy and hope.

Trigger warnings for drug addiction, sexual violence and depression.

I think this book is so special because it's so difficult to categorise as just one thing. It's part memoir, part fiction, part coming-of-age story, all suffused with elements of magic. Something I really loved about this book was the writing style; it was so lyrical and poetic. I listened to the audiobook, which was narrated by the author herself, and she read it in such a way that it sounded like she was reading verse. She hit certain syllables and words that made it sound almost magical.

And this lyrical prose was very tied to the element of magic, which I loved. There are sections in the book where Echo splits time, and she's able to experience two things at once. The narrative voice then cuts between the two experiences, and uses words to bridge the gap of time and space. I just wanna read you a little example here. Ah, in this scene, Echo is watching the film *Titanic* at the cinema with her brothers, while also at the same time, trying to convince a landlord on the East Side to rent a property to her. Quote:

"My brothers giggle when Kate's hand pushes against the window. I can tell they are slightly embarrassed and – guilty, which he tries to hide by looking past me at the painting over the kitchen sink. But I can tell by the guilt in his eyes, he knows he should give me a chance."

End quote. So, I just love this technique because here, Brown bridges the gap between the two experiences using the word "guilty". And this technique is consistently used when cutting between

two experiences, and it's a feature of the writing that I think really highlights the magic. For me, it felt like I wasn't only reading about magic, but the magic was woven into the text itself.

Now, the reason I loved the magical element to this book is that it's so versatile in the way you can interpret it. The synopsis on Goodreads kind of makes it sound like Echo Brown is actually a wizard, and there's kind of a magic system and it's almost a portal fantasy, but I think it's a lot more nuanced in the book. The way I interpreted it, is that magic and wizardry is an allegory for the ability that women have to empathise, and understand, and connect. In an interview for *The Nerd Daily*, Echo Brown said, quote:

"... my use of magic in this book is really to elevate the suffering of the characters in the book and canonize that struggle, honouring it with grace, humility, and reverence. Using magic was the only way to truly paint the depth of humanity of the characters and help you understand what it takes to survive in America with nothing. It takes sheer wizardry."

End quote. I think this really comes through in the symbol of the black veil. So, as the character of Echo learns more about wizardry, she gains the ability to see the quote-unquote "darkness", which takes the form of a black veil that shrouds a person. And, Brown – the author, not the character – makes it clear that the black veil is a symbol of depression, and I really liked that imagery and how it was represented, and also how it promoted empathy and understanding. Because when Echo saw the black veil over other people, it wasn't something she wanted to run away from, but it helped her understand the other person, and also made her want to help them.

And so this leads me into what I loved about Echo's character; she was so insightful and empathetic. I loved how she learnt how to question the things around her – why people were the way that they were, and in that, she challenged the systems in place. I thought she was a very easy character to connect with, and she felt really real for me. Um, I think her voice was really distinct, and that's – that's probably because it's part memoir. I also loved how the way Echo Brown writes about these heavy, important issues didn't feel, um, obtuse or unsubtle. Issues like racism and sexism and poverty were just a part of Echo's everyday life, and I thought it was so well-done in the way that it was woven into every interaction and every experience. I find sometimes when YA fiction tries to tackle an important topic, um, it's kind of like: "we're going to talk about this topical issue now, and this is what I believe." But *Black Girl Unlimited* did not do that at all, because all these issues were so inextricably linked with Echo's identity and coming-of-age story arc, and so it felt like it was just very real and truthful.

Black Girl Unlimited is quite a short book – the audiobook was only about 5 hours long, and Goodreads says the hardcover is only 300 pages. It's very readable and is for a YA audience, but, as I previously mentioned, it covers some pretty heavy topics, and there are some scenes that are very uncomfortable and upsetting to read, so just be mindful of that going in. I would definitely recommend this to anyone who likes character-driven hard-hitting contemporary, and readers who like the fabulism or magical realism genres.

So, my final rating of this book was five stars. It was understated and moving, and though it talked about pain and trauma, the ending was quite hopeful, and that's really what I look for in a book.

The Children's Book by A. S. Byatt

A. S. Byatt is a British author, and *The Children's Book* is her second most recently published novel. It was nominated for the 2009 Man Booker Prize, and published in 2009 by Chatto & Windus.

Set in turn of the century Edwardian England, the story begins with the bohemian Wellwood family taking in 13-year-old Phillip, an aspiring potter who has run away from his life of poverty and has been hiding in the newly built Victoria and Albert Museum. The matriarch of the family is Olive Wellwood, a famous children's author who introduces Phillip to their circle of cousins and friends; fellow artists, academics and bohemians. Over the span of thirty years, we follow three families and Phillip; their secrets, intimacies, and betrayals all intertwined. *The Children's Book* is an adult historical fiction novel that discusses the implications of secrets, fraught family dynamics, and the dichotomy of oppression vs. progress.

Trigger warnings for sexual assault, paedophilia, and incest.

This is the first A. S. Byatt that I've read, and boy, does she have a way with words. The prose in this book is incredible: it is lyrical and romantic, but it feels timeless. I don't usually enjoy historical fiction. I often get frustrated if the author either writes in a "ye olde" style that's way too over the top, or if they try and make their characters all progressive and feminist and it just feels too modern. The genius of Byatt is that it's implicit in her writing that she is writing this story from the perspective of a modern context. It's told in third person perspective, and the voice of the narrator references the historical events that are yet to come. And so we get this level of separation between the author's voice and the characters, and in this way it feels more truthful, knowing that Byatt acknowledges the inaccuracies and biases that are inevitably written into any work of historical fiction.

Byatt said she was inspired to write this story after learning that the children of children's book authors frequently led very sad lives. In an interview with the Guardian she says, quote:

"Christopher Robin at least lived. Kenneth Grahame's son put himself across a railway line and waited for the train. Then there's JM Barrie. One of the boys that Barrie adopted almost certainly drowned himself. This struck me as something that needed investigating."

End quote. This certainly comes through in Olive Wellwood's storyline, and her relationship with her children. Though Olive's passion is writing stories to appeal to children, and putting herself in the shoes of kids, she has a really fraught relationship with her own children, particularly her eldest son, Tom. And so I loved how – not only within the Wellwood family, but in all the families – there's a certain disconnect between the adults and the children, and they seem to move in completely separate spheres, absorbed by their own secrets and scandals. It's when the children grow older, and move into the world of adults themselves, that's when the emotions are intensified and the consequences to their actions become more dire.

The story is structured in a way that reminded me of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel García Márquez, in that we're following a cast of about fifteen characters as they move in and out of the city, and grow up, and have children, begin love affairs and end them. And there are so many people to keep track of, and so many switching perspectives, I actually had to draw a family tree

with all the different cousins and friends and families. And it's hard to pinpoint who this book is actually about, but I think that works in its favour. A. S. Byatt herself said, quote:

"I think there isn't a main character ... Iris Murdoch once said the world has enormously more people in it than you can ever imagine. She said whenever she finished a novel she wanted to start again and write it from the point of view of all the minor characters. In a sense I felt I was able to do that, because the minor characters became major characters when the book turned its gaze on them."

End quote. And the book really does feel like a patchwork quilt of vignettes and characters and lives, much like a collection of fairy-tales does. The characters are all living in the same world, but they move around each other in circles, sometimes intersecting, sometimes not.

The atmosphere of this novel was exquisite. If you like dark academia, then this book is definitely for you. Not only it about a woman who writes fairy-tales, but Byatt also uses some fairy-tale conventions in the work itself, so it feels somewhat magical to read. For example, there's a tree house in the woods, a puppet show, and a hiding place in the basement of a museum. At the same time, however, this is juxtaposed with the push for progress that was happening at the turn of the century in Europe. Byatt includes scenes at the 1900 Paris Exhibition, which was a very famous exhibition, or fairground of sorts, that included all these new advancements in technology. She also talks about the rise of the suffragette movement, and the founding of the Fabian society. I really liked how that push and pull was explored, and how we had these two kind of colliding aesthetics, um, that created a lot of tension.

Now, there were a few tangents in the book that described historical events and introduced political figures, um, which I didn't really care for. These paragraphs were quite long and boring and felt textbook-like, and didn't actually have a great effect on our characters, or the overall plot of the book.

Another disappointment for me was the ending. Look, I don't mind a sad ending, as long as there's a little ray of hope at the end to hold on to, you know, like some silver lining that lets me know that everything will turn out okay. Unfortunately, *The Children's Book* did not have that. The events of the book lead up to the beginning of WWI, and it's quite a shock to have the story cut off in such a way – in the middle of a war. I thought it was realistic that the lives of the young characters, you know, full of hopes and dreams and promises, were halted with the beginning of the war, but it did feel a little unfinished to me.

So, because of that, I rated this book four stars, but I don't give out half star ratings, so four is, like, still really, really good. And this is also a book I've continued to think about. I read it slowly so I felt like I want on this epic journey with the characters, and it's one that's really stuck in my mind. I would recommend this to anyone who likes dense literary fiction, and very atmospheric, character-driven novels. Also, anyone who are interested in art, especially turn of the century art. This book talks a lot about ceramics, and jewellery, and theatre, which I loved, of course. Again, the aesthetic is gorgeous.

Americanah by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is a Nigerian author, and *Americanah* is her most recently published novel. *Americanah* is the winner of the 2013 National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction, and was published in 2013 by Knopf.

Ifemelu and Obinze are young lovers who grow up together in Nigeria, but must part ways when Ifemelu moves to America for University. Confronted with a new country and a new culture, she is forced to grapple with what it means to be black in America. Though Obinze plans to meet her, his visa is rejected and so he instead moves to London as an undocumented immigrant. We follow Ifemelu's life in America over fifteen years; her jobs, her relationships, and her observations on race. *Americanah* is an adult contemporary fiction novel that talks about racism, the immigrant experience, and the intensity of all-consuming, long-lasting love.

Trigger warnings for sexual assault, depression, and suicide.

Now, I was apprehensive going into this book, because I was so ready to love it. I read Adichie's short story collection, *The Thing Around Your Neck*, ah, last year I think, and really enjoyed it, so I was just desperate to love this one as well. And let me tell you, it did not disappoint.

Americanah is a very slow-moving, character-driven story with not much plot, um, but I don't mind this in a book, particularly when the characters are so strong and well-developed. Ifemelu is our heroine. She is insightful and quick-witted, and a keen observer, um, she reminded me of kind of a modern-day Elizabeth Bennet. The thing that really made me love this book was its discussion of American culture. When Ifemelu first arrives in the US, she lives in Philadelphia. Coincidentally, this is where I was living up until the pandemic. Philadelphia was the first place in America where I truly lived on my own, and so I really related to Ifemelu finding her feet in Philadelphia, and it was also just really nice for me to recognise all the street names and suburbs. But more than that, Adichie really dissects American culture: the food, the accent, the turns of phrase, the ways in which people discuss certain topics and skirt around others. Now, my relationship to America as an outsider is different from Ifemelu's in that I am obviously white, and so I will never be able to understand what it's like to be non-American and black in America. I have, however, lived and worked in America as a non-American, and I really related to her observations of American culture. And she just put into words so many things that I had noticed or thought of, and so many things that I hadn't noticed, and hadn't thought of, about American culture. It was just incredible for me to read.

So much of this book is about immigration and identity, and Adichie writes about moving to another country with such nuance and understanding. When talking about her book to *The Guardian*, Adichie said, quote:

"It is about how, when we leave home, we become another version of ourselves."

End quote. So, Ifemelu talks about discovering her own blackness when she leaves Nigeria, because race is so politicised in America. And I loved the discussions on identity, and what it means to be an outlander in a country that has little to no prior knowledge or understanding of where you come from. In Nigeria, Ifemelu isn't prompted to think about her identity as much, because she's home, and everyone just gets it. But when she moves to America, her identity becomes an explanation.

But identity is explored not only when Ifemelu moves to America, but also when she comes back after living there for fifteen years. Upon her return, Ifemelu observes certain Nigerian habits and questions if things were always done that way, or if it had changed in the time she'd been away – she actually can't remember. And that sentiment in particular was one of the most touching things for me to read, um, because I have definitely experienced that feeling.

I was reading an interview with the author, and when she's asked what her book is about, she says, quote:

"It is about love. [...] And it is also about hair..."

End quote. Ifemelu's journey with her hair plays quite a significant role in the story. And Adichie explains why this is so important, and why hair is such an important symbol for black women. In an interview she says, quote:

"Hair is hair – yet also about larger questions: self-acceptance, insecurity and what the world tells you is beautiful."

End quote. So I loved how, throughout the story, we check in with Ifemelu's hair, and the journey of her hair kind of parallels her life in America, and I – I thought that was fantastic symbolism.

I think this book is also special because the writing style earns a certain kind of trust from the reader. When I was reading it, I felt that I was in really good hands, that I wouldn't be led astray, and that everything would turn out okay in the end. I think this is because the style achieves a really great balance of lyricism and realism, often leaning on the realistic side when describing American life. Some of the most brilliant scenes were, in my opinion, the various dinner party scenes scattered throughout the book, when the Americans discuss politics. Every single character in these scenes – even if they were introduced in that very scene and never heard from again – felt so real and alive to me. Similarly, what I was talking about with *Black Girl Unlimited*, I feel like sometimes scenes in which characters discuss big ideas, or politics, or big issues in society, can often feel kind of preach-y and unrealistic, but I found the opposite in *Americanah*. I think Adichie has a real gift for dialogue, and the dialogue scenes were some of my favourite sections to read, because they felt so real, and revealed so much about America.

Now, the way this book is marketed, I think is a little misleading. Goodreads led me to believe that the story would be told in dual perspective with equal time spent on Ifemelu and Obinze, but it is not that. It's around 70% Ifemelu and 30% Obinze, but don't let that disappoint you. I found Ifemelu's perspective so engaging and interesting, that I didn't really want to switch to Obinze's perspective after all, um, but I do think it was necessary to offer a bit of a juxtaposition between England and America, and to also offer more insight on their relationship.

As well as tackling big societal issues and concepts, this book is also about love, and first love, and long-lasting love. And I loved the way Obinze and Ifemelu's relationship was so present throughout the storyline. Even when Ifemelu was in relationships with other people, or she was doing something that was not related to Obinze at all, and she would just think of him. And we would a little more insight into what their relationship was like, and how they felt towards each other, and

how that connection sustained over fifteen years, even though they lost contact with each other. And I thought their relationship was so beautiful, it was just – it was a joy to read.

So this was definitely a five star book for me. I kind of just want everyone in the world to read it! Um, but particularly people who live in America, or who have been to America. I think it's very enlightening to read a book set in America told from the perspective of a non-American. But this is definitely for anyone who likes epic, character-driven stories, and for those who are interested in themes of identity, and relationships, and immigration. And don't be scared by the high page count! I read this book on audio, and the narration was incredible, so give that a go if you're a bit freaked out by the thickness of the book. I think any reader will be able to both learn from and relate to this book, because I certainly did.

So, those are all the books I'll be reviewing today, please let me know on Instagram or Twitter if you are inclined to pick these books up, or if you've already read them, what you thought of them! Just another reminder, our book club pick is *Clap When You Land* by Elizabeth Acevedo, and we'll be discussing that on the 26th of this month, which is exactly two weeks away.

[theme music]

Finally, thank you very much for listening. If you enjoyed it, you can subscribe on iTunes or Spotify so you never miss an episode. You can follow The Community Library on Instagram @the_community_library. If you DM me, I don't reply to DMs in the app, but sometimes I shout you out on the podcast, and I do read them, and I write down all your suggestions for discussion topics, or episodes, or books to read! I also have a blog: angourieslibrary.wordpress.com, and there you can find full transcriptions of the episodes and more links and resources. The podcast artwork is designed by Ashley Ronning. You can look at more of her work at ashleyronning.com. Until next week, I hope you're all keeping safe and healthy, and washing your hands and reading good books. Once again, thanks for listening, and I will talk to you next time. Bye!

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