

4.1 Books I Read on Holiday

Angourie [host]

Before I begin, I acknowledge the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin Nation as the Traditional Custodians of the land on which I record today. I pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

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

Angourie [host]

Hello everyone, 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.

[fade out: theme music]

Angourie [host]

Happy New Year, everyone! Happy Season Four! To new listeners, welcome. If you haven't listened before, I'm Angourie Rice, I'm an actor, I'm a podcaster, and I'm a massive bookworm. I make podcast episodes mostly about books, sometimes about movies, and often about how storytelling influences culture and vice versa. I've done episodes on Shakespeare and fairy tales, but also episodes on *Clueless* and *Twilight*. So if you like the sound of that, chuck us a subscribe, why don't you?

I hope this holiday season treated you well, I hope you all stayed safe and healthy and took care of yourselves. And of course, I also hope you read some good books, or maybe watched some good movies, or some good TV shows, or maybe you played a great board game – I certainly did. The start of a new year is often a time for reflections and goal-setting, which I have actually done over on Instagram, as an IGTV video. In that video I take you through all my 2020 reading stats with graphs and pie charts and statistics and numbers, I love that shit. Um, but I also talk about my 2021 reading goals. So, if you are interested in that, if you also like maths and data like me, then give it a watch – you can find it on Instagram @the_community_library. Also, if you're interested in knowing my favourite books of 2020, I did a whole episode on that – The Community Library Reading Awards – again, I will link that for you in the show notes. And if you don't have time to listen – or you just don't want to – if you prefer reading, there's also a blog post that takes you through all my favourite books. So, there you go. They'll all be linked – so many things to watch and listen to.

But today, I want to talk to you about what I read on holiday. This holiday, with the lack of restrictions in Australia – we've been so lucky, we've been able to keep everything under control, and so I was able to go to the beach for the holidays, which was absolutely delightful. And of course, when one goes on holiday, one must bring books! I brought a lot of books with me, and then I received more for Christmas and more for my birthday! In total, I read eleven books over the holiday period, and I would like to share them with you. I did a series of posts on my Instagram that were #AngouriesBeachReads, so you might recognise some of the books on this list from there. And it was actually someone's comment on one of those posts that inspired me to make a whole episode dedicated to what I read on holiday. Without further ado, my friends, let's get into the

books. I'm going to go in vague order of least favourite to most favourite, so we'll start on a low, I'm sorry, but we'll end with a high. Kind of the opposite of what happened in 2020.

[fade in: upbeat swing music with high hat, plucky guitar, saxophone, piano]

Before the Coffee Gets Cold by Toshikazu Kawaguchi, published in 2015

'In a small back alley in Tokyo, there is a café that offers its customers the chance to travel back in time. We meet four visitors, each of whom is hoping to take advantage of this special offer, but there is a risk: they must return to the present before the coffee gets cold.'

[fade out: music]

So, as I'm sure you've noticed by now, this is on the bottom of my list. Much to my surprise and disappointment, this just book did not work for me. My dislike began with the writing style, I found it very bland and dull. *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* was originally a play, and though this style of writing would have been sufficient in a playscript, in novel form it felt dry and obvious. The sentence structure wasn't varied, it was monotonous and filled with statements that told the reader how the characters were feeling, rather than showed. Though I found the set-up intriguing, the stories in themselves were predictable, the characters cliché and cold. I found it very difficult to connect with the characters. A feature of this book was that every story centred around female pain: a woman being dumped, a sister grieving, a wife whose husband doesn't remember her, a mother who won't live to see her child. Each of these emotional conflicts I think are interesting and sad within themselves, yet I felt they were flattened and cheapened by the short format of the book and the dry prose. Also, the moral at the end of each story is quite conservative; the women overcome their pain through much sacrifice on their part. The dumped woman finds happiness in waiting three years for her boyfriend to come back from overseas, the grieving sister abandons her independence for the domestic life that has always been expected from her, because it's 'what her sister would have wanted.' The wife whose husband doesn't remember her starts going by her married name again, in an effort to keep that connection. And finally, the pregnant mother in fragile health decides to have her child anyway, knowing it will kill her. So each outcome shows a woman pandering to societal expectations, abandoning their initial resistance and settling into what was expected of them in the first place: to wait for a man, to keep house, to wait for a man again, or to have a child. So overall, I was disappointed by this book and I wish I had seen it as a play, I think that medium would have done a lot more for the story, and I would have emotionally connected with the characters more.

[fade in: slow bass and strings swing music, with twinkly xylophone over the top]

10 Blind Dates by Ashley Elston, published in 2019

'When Sophie is unexpectedly dumped by her boyfriend right before Christmas, her Nonna devises a plan to get Sophie to move on: Over the next ten days, Sophie will be set up on ten different blind dates by ten different family members.'

[fade out: music]

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This YA Christmas romance was like candy floss: sweet, fluffy. But then, that's what you expect when you eat candy floss, and you enjoy it all the same. This book is exactly what it says on the tin: it's a teenager going on ten blind dates. Most of the characters were, in all honesty, quite forgettable, especially the protagonist, she didn't seem to have much personality. Her friendship with her cousin was enjoyable, as was the comedy that came from the chaotic family dynamic. The romance was sweet, but very predictable and very slow-burn, which, in this case, I didn't care for. Overall, I probably won't remember this book, but it was a good audiobook to listen to while doing Sudoku by the beach.

[fade in: upbeat brass jazz music with piano]

The Curious Case of Benjamin Button by F. Scott Fitzgerald, published in 1922

'Benjamin Button is born an old man, with a long silver beard, a hunch and a fondness to smoke cigars. But as time passes, Benjamin becomes increasingly youthful. He ages backwards, and lives his life in reverse.'

[fade out: music]

This was the last book I read in 2020, in a desperate effort to get from 99 books to 100. There's not much to this short story: it's quaint, quirky and sad. Fitzgerald takes a fun concept and uses it to comment on age and life experience. There's only so much you can do in 36 pages, and though this story wasn't very impactful, it was a great vehicle for F. Scott Fitzgerald's perceptive prose.

[fade in: poppy, happy, upbeat music with piano, guitar and synth]

My Favourite Half-Night Stand by Christina Lauren, published in 2018

'When Millie and her best friend Reid mistakenly cross the line from friendship to romance, they mutually decide they should keep things platonic. But their decision is complicated when Millie creates a fictional dating profile for fun – the elusive yet vulnerable 'Catherine' – and Reid falls for it. Millie is falling in love with Reid, but Reid is falling in love with 'Catherine' ...'

[fade out: music]

My Favourite Half-Night Stand was my third Christina Lauren book that I've read, and unfortunately my least favourite of the three. That being said, I still love their writing style – they consistently deliver fun and believable romances. This is a friends to lovers romance, with a bit of catfishing thrown in for some spice. I don't usually like the friends to lovers trope, and the catfishing trope I find difficult to believe and forgive, but Christina Lauren managed to tie it all together in a way that made it feel somewhat realistic. The chemistry between the Millie and Reid was convincing, and I enjoyed their friendship group dynamic. Despite this book is told in dual perspective, I struggled to connect with either Millie or Reid. The things Millie said or did, when viewed from Reid's perspective, were inconsistent with what we knew about her from her own perspective, and vice versa with Reid. Where, in other Christina Lauren romances, I felt the protagonists were my best friends, in *My Favourite Half-Night Stand*, I felt they were polite acquaintances. However, this

hasn't deterred me from picking up more Christina Lauren in the future, I still really enjoy their books.

[fade in: old-fashioned swing music with a menacing brass melody and twinkly piano]

Murder in Mesopotamia by Agatha Christie, published in 1936

'Nurse Amy Leatheran agrees to look after American archaeologist Dr Leidner's wife Louise at a dig in Iraq. But when Louise is found dead in her room, Amy finds herself as aid to the great detective Hercule Poirot as he attempts to solve the murder.'

[fade out: music]

Rare is the Agatha Christie mystery – especially Poirot mystery – told from the perspective of a woman. Nurse Amy Leatheran was an interesting narrator – her prose was plain and matter-of-fact, yet also ignorant and rude about all that was not understood by her. She had a very scornful, narrow-minded view of archaeology, the local culture, and 'foreigners' – such as Hercule Poirot. It was difficult to discern how much of Nurse Leatheran's commentary came from and was believed by Christie herself, and how much was a witty attack on people like Nurse Leatheran. I felt this aspect of the book wasn't clear and hasn't aged very well. Something I enjoyed about *Murder in Mesopotamia* was the character work that was put into understanding the victim: the elegant and magnetic Louise. Christie took care to make the audience understand Louise's psychology, and thus demonstrated that was the key to solving the murder. As always, the mystery was enjoyable and the conclusion very satisfying. Poirot was as jovial and camp as ever, and was, of course, three steps ahead of me, as I failed to guess it correctly.

[fade in: low-key jazz music with piano, upright bass and trumpet]

If I Never Met You by Mhairi McFarlane, published in 2020

'When her partner of over a decade suddenly ends things, Laurie is left shocked and embarrassed, dreading having to face him at work every day. But a chance encounter in a broken-down elevator with the office playboy opens up a new possibility. They'll pretend to date: Laurie can flaunt a hot new man, Jamie Carter can discard his bad reputation and impress his bosses. But if faking love is easy, how do you know when it's real?'

[fade out: music]

I went into *If I Never Met You* expecting a light and fluffy romance, and I was pleasantly surprised to find that this book held so much more than that. Though it's sold as a contemporary fake-dating-trope romance, it's really about a woman struggling to redefine herself after a long-term relationship. McFarlane doesn't shy away from tackling bigger issues like strained parental relationships and toxic masculinity, and that gives the traditional romance storyline an extra punch. For me, the highlight of this novel was Laurie's friendship with Emily, and McFarlane made it clear to the audience that this relationship was actually the grounding force of the novel. It was a realistically healthy and supportive female friendship, and it just made me feel all warm and fuzzy inside. However, I unfortunately I never wholly believe the fake dating trope. No matter how many

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times I see it done, it's still feels far-fetched and silly. So, strangely, my least favourite aspect of this romance novel was ... the romance. I look forward to reading more from Mhairi McFarlane in future, possibly one of her novels that uses a romance trope that's more to my taste.

[fade in: action-hero-style music, low droning bass with crescendo-ing brass and strings]

The Son of Neptune by Rick Riordan, published in 2010

'The second book in the *Heroes of Olympus* series. The first book in the series, *The Lost Hero*, follows three Greek Demigods on a quest to rescue Hera, the queen of the gods. But a greater power is stirring, and a prophecy tells of seven demigods who must work together to defeat it ...'

[fade out: music]

Rick Riordan never fails to deliver on funny characters and an engaging plot, but the *Heroes of Olympus* series offers more than the original *Percy Jackson* series in its more complex themes of duty, violence, and the burden of expectations. In the second book in the *Heroes of Olympus* series we're following three characters, one of whom we already know: Percy Jackson, and two new characters: Frank and Hazel. Though Percy isn't my favourite character, I loved his friendship with Frank and Hazel – sidenote: Frank is a darling and must be protected at all costs. I think Riordan's storytelling craft shines through when he embraces the more emotional B-plots; focussing on friendship, romance and grief. A highlight for me in this particular book was the discussion on war and violence, and how we reconcile that as part of our history and culture.

[fade in: smooth, slow jazz music with deep bass and ominous clarinet]

The Blank Wall by Elisabeth Sanxay Holding, published in 1947

'With her husband fighting in world war two, a suburban housewife finds herself implicated in the murder of her teenage daughter's dangerous boyfriend, and must do everything she can to protect her family.'

[fade out: music]

This domestic suspense novel was unexpected favourite. Being a vintage pulp fiction thriller, I didn't expect it to have such a perceptive commentary on the role of the domestic housewife. The murder mystery isn't really the central idea of the novel, it's merely a vehicle for Sanxay Holding to explore the societal expectations placed on women – especially mothers – and how suffocating these ideals are. Mrs. Lucia Harper, our protagonist, is unable to do anything for herself – go into town, go for a walk, go for a drive – without her family asking questions. I really enjoyed reading such a surprisingly modern discussion of motherhood. Overall, it was short and punchy, with the perfect combination of political commentary and mysterious suspense.

[fade in: French café music with piano-accordion]

Bonjour Tristesse by Françoise Sagan, published 1954

‘Seventeen-year-old Cécile lives a carefree life with her widowed father and his young mistress until, one hot summer on the French Riviera, he decides to remarry – with devastating consequences.’

[fade out: music]

I loved this intense, quiet novella, written by Françoise Sagan when she was just eighteen. With its sad and sundrenched atmosphere, it reminded me of André Aciman’s *Call Me By Your Name*, but it succeeded in achieving the nuance, depth and truth that I felt *Call Me By Your Name* lacked. Our protagonist, the moody and romantic Cécile, is the epitome of teenage angst and boredom. Her languid musings are spell-binding, her juvenile schemes addictive. This was the perfect short holiday read about summer love, youth and naivety.

[fade in: dramatic battle music with stomping bass and big drums]

Troy by Stephen Fry, published in 2020

‘A retelling of the Trojan War. The kidnapping of Helen, a queen celebrated for her beauty, sees the Greeks launch a thousand ships against the great city of Troy. What follows is a ten-year-long bloody battle.’

[fade out: music]

Following *Mythos* and *Heroes*, *Troy* is the third instalment in Stephen Fry’s retellings of the ancient Greek myths. The Trojan War is an epic story, but Stephen Fry makes sure to hold the reader’s hand as he guides us through family feuds and love affairs. Though I wouldn’t necessarily call this book ‘clear’ – Greek myth is anything but that – Fry successfully untangles the threads and weaves a delicate tapestry, drawing your eye to the important details, and allowing you to come to your own conclusions. I like how Fry tells the story with humour and kindness to the reader, but he also succeeds in the more serious moments, giving appropriate weight to the violence and destruction of war. As always, the lack of insight from the women’s perspectives is a disappointment, but to remedy that I intend on reading *A Thousand Ships* by Natalie Haynes. This is a retelling of the Trojan War from an all-female perspective. My favourite part of *Troy* was the appendix titled ‘Myth and Reality’, which illuminated the complexities of fact and fiction, and how they are inextricably linked to make up our history.

[fade in: Spanish-style guitar music]

With the Fire on High by Elizabeth Acevedo, published in 2019

‘With a two-year-old daughter to care for, high school senior Emoni is a teenager dealing with adult decisions. The one place she can let her responsibilities go is in the kitchen, where her passion for cooking reigns. When her school introduces a new culinary arts class, Emoni finally gets the opportunity to do something for herself, and follow her dream of becoming a chef.’

[fade out: music]

Elizabeth Acevedo strikes again! I read all three of her novels last year, and loved every single one. In *The Poet X* and *Clap When You Land*, she delivered poignant coming-of-age tales, but this time, she offers a more mature protagonist struggling with more adult problems and responsibilities. *With the Fire on High* differs from Acevedo's other two novels in that it focusses less on plot, and more on character. The thing that makes this book special is Emoni: she is the heart and soul of this story. I loved her tenacity, her drive, but also her more vulnerable moments, which Acevedo handled with delicacy and nuance. The discussions on teenage motherhood were a particular highlight for me, and added another complex layer to the story. Acevedo adopts prose for *With the Fire on High*, rather than her usual verse like in *The Poet X* and *Clap When You Land*, but she still injects her trademark lyricism and cadence to the writing. I can't wait to see what Acevedo does next; she has already become one of my favourite authors.

[fade in and out: upbeat vintage jazz music with trombone, saxophone, and high hat drum beat]

So there we come to the end of all the books I read on holiday! And I'd say out of the eleven books I read on holiday, about six of them were great successes, four of them were average, and there was only one that I actively disliked. So, overall, quite a good selection, if I do say so myself! Now, a bit of housekeeping, I want to tell you a little bit about what's coming up on the podcast. I am very excited for this season! I know I say that every season, but I have so many great ideas for episodes that I can't wait to share with you. I'm also very excited for our first book club pick of the year for February, which I can reveal is ... *Grown* by Tiffany D. Jackson, published in 2020. This is a YA contemporary mystery about fame, power, and music. I want to read you the synopsis because it sounds so great and I can't put it into better words.

[fade in: laid-back hip hop beat with ominous synth played over the top]

'Korey Fields is dead.

When Enchanted Jones wakes with blood on her hands and zero memory of the previous night, no one—the police and Korey's fans included—has more questions than she does. All she really knows is that this isn't how things are supposed to be. Korey was Enchanted's ticket to stardom.

Before there was a dead body, Enchanted was an aspiring singer, struggling with her tight knit family's recent move to the suburbs while trying to find her place as the lone Black girl in high school. But then legendary R&B artist Korey Fields spots her at an audition. And suddenly her dream of being a professional singer takes flight.

Enchanted is dazzled by Korey's luxurious life but soon her dream turns into a nightmare. Behind Korey's charm and star power hides a dark side, one that wants to control her every move, with rage and consequences. Except now he's dead and the police are at the door. Who killed Korey Fields?

All signs point to Enchanted.'

[fade out: music]

I can't wait to discuss this book with you all, I think it's going to be a great one, I've heard some fantastic things about it. Before you pick up this book, however, there are some content warnings for emotional, physical and sexual abuse, and it also features an adult/minor relationship. If you want to see a more detailed list of content warnings, I will link the book's page on The StoryGraph, it's a website like Goodreads. And on this page there's a little tab that you can expand to see the full list of warnings, if you think this book might contain some content that you are sensitive to. I will be discussing *Grown* by Tiffany D. Jackson on the 28th of February, so you've got over a month to read it! I really hope you read along with me, it'll be so much fun. And on my Instagram, I always ask you guys questions, what you thought of the book, if you want me to talk about anything in particular in the episode. So if you read along, you can ask me questions and I'll include them in the episode. Other than that, I don't think I have any more to say except thank you for listening!

[fade in: twinkly piano theme music with triangle and strings]

You can follow me on Instagram or Twitter @angourierice, or The Community Library on Instagram @the_community_library – that's where I hang out most. Until next week, I hope you're taking good care of yourselves, and reading some good books. Bye.

[fade out: theme music]