

## 5.08 Your Favourite Books of the Year

### 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 offer my respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

[theme music fade in]

### Angourie [host]

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

[theme music fade out]

### Angourie [host]

It is November, and you know what that means? It means it's almost December, and you know what that means? It means it's almost the end of another year of reading. And what a year it has been, reading or otherwise. If you haven't been here before, hello, I'm Angourie. I'm an actor and podcaster, and I love talking about books. And unfortunately this week, I'm a little bit under the weather, so we're taking it easy. *The Community Library* is a podcast for people who love stories, whether it's books, movies, or music, but here we mostly focus on books. And this week, I asked myself, and I asked you, the listeners, and I asked my own family, about the best book you have read this year. And it was so wonderful to get so many responses from the audience about all the books you loved and why! And it was also delightful, as always, to interview my family about their favourite book of the year. If you'd like to participate in something like this in future, then you can follow me on Instagram @the\_community\_library; that's where I ask for audience participation!

But selfishly, this episode, I'm going to start with myself, and then I'll share the interviews with my family, and finally I'll highlight some of your favourite books of the year. So my favourite book of the year ... here's the thing. At the end of every year, I usually do *The Community Library Reading Awards*, which are not really awards at all, the criteria is literally just what I liked. I am the only person on the judging panel, which hardly seems fair or well-rounded. But anyway, there are a bunch of awards I give out, and one of them is my 'book of the year'. So, to keep the mystery alive, I'm going to briefly highlight my top three. And keep in mind, a book that I read in the next two months could make book of the year, too, so this is not definite.

The first contender is *In the Dream House* by Carmen Maria Machado, which I've talked about lots on the podcast. This is a memoir about the author's experience of an abusive relationship. What I loved about this book was the writing style. The story is told through vignettes that frame aspects of the relationship as different genres or literary tropes. So the book is kind of a hybrid of memoir and literary criticism, and it explores themes of abuse, queer identity, and the act of storytelling. And if you are a frequent listener to the podcast, you know that I love books about books and stories and deconstructing the way we tell

stories, and that's what *In the Dream House* does. I'd recommend this book to anyone who likes ambitious, genre-bending literature that investigates and subverts tropes. But please check trigger warnings before you go into it, this is quite a heavy read.

Next up is *This is How You Lose the Time War* by Amal El-Mohtar and Max Gladstone. This is, unexpectedly for me, a sci-fi novella told through letters. I say unexpectedly because I don't usually go for sci-fi, but I really loved this one. In it we follow Red and Blue; they are time-travelling agents on opposing sides of a war happening through time. They communicate in letters hidden in the strangest places: the rings of a tree, the smoke of a chemical reaction, the seeds of a flower, and through these letters they begin to fall in love. The main thing I loved about this book was that it was just a beautiful love story. I mean, it was quite a high-concept sci-fi, but that didn't mean the language was all futuristic and scientific; it was lyrical and poetic and romantic. I'd recommend this to anyone who likes a good love story. It's kind of a retelling of *Romeo and Juliet* I think, and even though it's sci-fi it doesn't compromise on any of the drama, tragedy or romance.

Finally, we have *Water Under the Bridge* by Sumner Locke Elliott. This was another unexpected favourite, and I spoke about it recently in my last quarterly update. This is an Australian novel written and published in the 70s, but set at the time of the author's youth, in between the wars Sydney, so it's 1930s Sydney. We follow a large cast of characters, but our two protagonists are a young aspiring actor and a small town girl who's just moved to the big city in the hopes of becoming a journalist. The standout feature of this novel for me was the characters, hands down. It's a very character-driven novel, and they carry it completely. Each character was so vivid and real, I felt that I knew them. You know when you read a book sometimes that feels so true and realistic you feel like you know the people in it? That's the experience I had reading it. So I'd recommend this to anyone who likes realistic, character-driven fiction that perfectly captures the balance of comedy and tragedy in life.

But enough of me talking! My voice is getting sore. Let's hear what my family had to say about their favourite books of the year. So first up, I spoke to my sister, Kalliope. She is a frequent guest on the podcast – actually, of all the guests I've had, she has featured the most with six episodes. This marks her seventh! I keep bringing her back because you, the audience, seem to love her. I love her too. Take it away, Kalliope!

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### **Kalliope**

I would say probably *Northanger Abbey* by Jane Austen. It's about a young woman who goes to Bath with family friends, and then from there is invited to a big nice house with people that she met to stay. And will she fall in love? Nooooo ... she couldn't possibly! And I really enjoyed it. I really loved the characters. I really like how real the characters are, and I find this with a lot of Jane Austen's books, that the setting is in such a different time, and everything that happens is so different from how it does today, but the characters are always so universal and so timeless in being able to recognise how their actions or their personalities continue into people I know in my life. So yeah, there were particular characters who weren't very nice, and I loved how, reading that I could see exactly what

kind of person they were, and how I feel like I know people who are like that today. I'd recommend this book to people who like Jane Austen and have read her other books, and anyone who enjoys classics. And people who enjoy just fun comedy romance in a book, and anyone who enjoys classics and things like that.

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**Angourie**

Thank you for that, Kalliope! Next I spoke to my mum, who has also featured quite a bit on the podcast, as she is one of the smartest people I know, so let's hear what she had to say about her favourite book.

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**Kate**

My favourite book that I have read this year is called *The House of Mirth* and it's by Edith Wharton. The book is about a young woman living in New York high society in the early parts of the twentieth century, so very sort of 1900s. And it's about her journey through that society, looking for her place in the world. What I really loved about this book – it had a couple of elements that I really enjoy in any novel. One is a young woman looking for her place in the world, I love books about that. When they're trying to find their way and working out what they – who they are and what they need to do to express who they are. I love a feisty heroine, I love a heroine who is smart, and Lily Bart, the heroine of *The House of Mirth* is incredibly clever. I also love a love story, and this has elements of a love story in it. But the main thing in this book that I really love – and it's an element that I've seen in some other novels which are my favourite novels ever – is that it's about a person who can save themselves, and chooses not to, because to save themselves would be to live a life that isn't worth living. So it's about standing by your convictions. I love that, mainly because I suspect I would never be that strong. Like, I think I would also be like, "No, sell out, sell out!" But this character does not, and that's awesome. I think this is a book for people who enjoy language and like rich, deep language. It's not an easy book, it's not really an easy read. There's also a lot of characters you've gotta keep track of. There are deep and intense conversations that you've really gotta pay attention in this novel. It's very rewarding, but it is challenging. And it also helps if you know a little bit about social history, and what society may or would have been like around that time. Read this book, it's super cool, if you're a movie producer, make a movie of it.

**Angourie**

And cast me!

**Kate**

And cast Angourie! Yeah, actually, that would be really cool. Thank you, over and out!

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**Angourie**

Thank you very much, Kate! Finally, I spoke to my dad, who asked me if the interview was audio only, or if he should do his hair. Unfortunately this podcast is audio only, and so you can't see the magnificent mane of hair my dad has grown over lockdown, his hair is longer than mine now. Alas. Let's hear what his favourite book of the year was.

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### Jeremy

I've read lots of books this year that I've really enjoyed. The one I'm nominating today is a little unusual, it's called *A Serenade to Big Bird* by Bert Stiles, and it's out of print, and I found it on the internet and read a copy online in the Open Library. It's autobiography, or memoir. Bert Stiles was a middle class young man in Colorado in the 1930s and 40s. He dropped out of college to become a writer, and one summer he wrote for ten hours a day, unbroken, the entire summer, to become a writer. And he succeeded, he started to get stories published by the Saturday Evening Post, which was the place to have your short stories published at the time. And then he volunteered for the Air Force in World War II. And he went to England, he was based in England with an American squadron of bombers, and he participated in lots of bombing missions over Germany – over Europe. And then he was grounded for a period, so, probably stress leave, and then he returned to flying and was killed in action. And so while he was serving, he kept writing, and it's probably when he was grounded for his mental health that he wrote a 200-page memoir, and then his mother organised for it to be published in England in 1947, so as a memorial to him. The memoir, it's really moving, it's really sad. He's a very sensitive soul, who is basically a pacifist and a humanist. And he writes a lot about his thoughts on why the war's taking place, and who it's impacting, down to the very specifics of when he drops a bomb from 20,000 feet or 40,000 feet, whatever it is, on a village below that he can't see, you know, he thinks about who he's killing. Yes, I suppose, to read it, when I started reading it, I already know he'd died before the book was published, so it's – that, combined with his sensitivity in the writing makes it a melancholy read. The interest in the book and its profile, and in the author, Bert Stiles, has been maintained by Air Force fans, aficionados, and historians – amateur historians, who really value the book for its detailed, authentic description of what it was like to fly a US bomber plane in World War II. I think it'll always have that audience, cause there are, you know, these mad keen people who love military history, who are out there reading the book, writing about it, recommending it to others, taking it to conferences about the Air Force. So I would recommend it to a completely different audience of readers. It does – it's got a real American mid-century style. You know, the writer writing about his – you know, it's very male – his lived experience. So it feels, say, it's much more like reading Ernest Hemingway, for example, than F. Scott Fitzgerald, cause it's memoir. He did these things, and he writes about what he did. But I think I was really surprised at just how – at his thoughtfulness. I mean, he digresses a lot, it can be a bit rambling at times, but I just think his thoughtfulness and his sensitivity about war I think is quite extraordinary. Yeah, so maybe not a great literary work, but a really interesting snapshot into the mind of someone who went to war cause he thought that was the right thing to do, but really questioned whether he was doing right, or doing good in it.

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## Angourie

Thank you very much, Jeremy! And now that we've spoken to my family, let's hear what your favourite books of the year are! So first up, I asked on Instagram just like one of those question stickers, and I got so many responses. I think the most mentioned book was *Dune* by Frank Herbert. Since the long-awaited film adaptation has just come out, I'm not surprised it's been a favourite book this year. I have not read it, as I said, not a huge fan of sci-fi, maybe I'll give it a go one day, we'll see. *The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo* by Taylor Jenkins Reid was also mentioned a few times as people's favourite book of the year. I read that a few years ago and really enjoyed it – it was such a quick and entertaining read. It was exactly what I needed at that time that I read it, so it was a really fun experience. *Crime and Punishment* by Fyodor Dostoyevsky was mentioned more than once. Look, I applaud all of you who not only read that mammoth of a book, but also loved it enough to call it your favourite book of the year. I am very impressed, I have yet to tackle that one. Many people mentioned Sally Rooney's works as favourites; I saw *Normal People* mentioned, and her new book, *Beautiful World, Where Are You*. I've only read *Normal People* of hers, but I am interested in picking up *Conversations With Friends* before the TV show adaptation comes out. A few people mentioned *Girl, Woman, Other* by Bernadine Evaristo. I've heard so many good things about this book, and I've wanted to read it for a while, but I was deterred when I found out that there's almost no punctuation, which is a pet peeve of mine. Again, there's no punctuation in *Normal People*, and that's another thing that's stopped me from picking up more Sally Rooney. But other people have said it hasn't bothered them, so maybe I should just get over myself and read it. At least two people said their favourite book this year was the lyrics to *All Too Well (10 Minute Version)* by Taylor Swift. I must say, I agree, that song is a lyrical masterpiece. But I also offered you, the listeners, the option to DM me with longer responses, describing what the book is about, and what you liked about it, and who you would recommend it to. I got so many great responses, I'm sorry I can't mention all of them in this episode! But I did want to highlight a few here.

So first up, we've got this message from E. They said: "The best book I've read this year has been *The Thing Around Your Neck* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. It's a collection of short stories about the lived experience of Nigerian women and their struggles / triumphs. What I found to be particularly interesting was the analysis of negative Western influence and colonialism / neo-colonialism. It really broadened my mindset and I could honestly say that after reading I had a totally new perspective. I would recommend to absolutely anybody, but especially people studying literature. I studied this in my AP English class and so I know how much we enjoyed it when we were analysing all sorts of books and films."

What a lovely message, I think it's always so wonderful to read a book that changes how you look at something, that's always such a transformative and impactful experience. I've also read *The Thing Around Your Neck*, and I really enjoyed it, and I felt very similar. That was the first Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie I read, and it introduced me to more of her work, which I have since really loved.

A said: "Arlo Finch in the Valley of Fire (and its two sequels). It's a middle grade fantasy story about a kid who moves to Colorado with his family and joins the Rangers (Scouts if you'd prefer) where he discovers magic and mystery and new friends. I shan't say more about the plot because for me the joy of it was in the discovery. What I will say is that it has some of

the most inventive, interesting and morish world-building since Harry Potter (minus the 7-book epicness) and has a type of fantasy I'd never experienced before and really loved."

That sounds like so much fun. I'm actually just about to come to the end of the *Heroes of Olympus* series in the Percy Jackson world, so I'm definitely on the lookout for a new middle grade fantasy. Portal fantasy – urban fantasy, I think you call it, that's not high fantasy. So it's like, you discover magic lurking beneath the real world. So that sounds like a really good option for me to try next, so thank you for that recommendation.

K says: "The best book I've read this year is a graphic novel (the first I've ever read!) called *Asterios Polyp*. It's about the lead up to, and recovery from, a man's mid-life crisis, and it's narrated by his twin who died in the womb. The art style is phenomenal and the characters are deep and layered and it's really just a beautiful read. I would recommend it to anyone who has ever dismissed graphic novels as being only for people who can't read "real" books! And to people who love art, and who love love."

That sounds like a wonderful recommendation! I actually looked up this book and the art style is so unique, unlike anything I've seen before, and I really like that this was their first graphic novel that they read, and they really enjoyed it, cause I also tried out some graphic novels this year for the first time, and I really loved that experience. There's actually a whole podcast episode about it, if you'd like to check it out. So thank you for that recommendation, I will continue my graphic novel journey with that one.

E says: "My Sweet Orange Tree by José Mauro de Vasconcelos. It's about a boy called Zezé and his loss of innocence. We see topics like abuse, the loss of loved ones, economic issues and true friendship from the eyes of that sad little boy. He has this inner monologue where you really get to understand the way he sees things as a child. He even has a little tree called Minguito, to whom he talks as his only true friend. It's a really short read. Here in Latin America, that book is an essential read in schools, so I'd definitely recommend it to 12 year olds and up."

This sounds like such a fascinating book. I always love hearing what required reading is in other countries. I think that's so interesting to see what books are put on school curriculums. Obviously in Australia we grow up with certain classics from England and America and Australia that we read in school, so it's always really wonderful to hear about classics from other countries that are studied in schools. So, thank you very much for drawing this one to my attention, it sounds really wonderful.

J says: "Sigh, *Gone* by Phuc Tran is about a young Vietnamese immigrant kid's experience growing up in a small town Pennsylvania told through themes of great literary works. I love the connections of the various themes in his book to the great literary work. But I feel like it's also a book I identify with as a minority growing up in a very white America. It is a great book for people who love memoirs with lots of teen angst and struggle to find one's identity in a different country and culture. Plus it's a very fun read."

Thank you so much for sharing that, J. I looked at this book online, and it looks fantastic. It actually looks like something I would really love to read, especially because I love *In the*

*Dream House* so much, which combines memoir with features of great literary works. You also said this is a fun read, which is lovely, and I would definitely like to read more memoirs. If you listened to my episode recently about nonfiction, I am slowly getting into nonfiction and finding the niche I enjoy in memoirs, and this sounds like something I would really enjoy, so thank you for the recommendation.

That's all I have for you today, thank you all very much for sharing your delightful reading experiences this year! What a joy it is to hear that people have discovered books that they loved. Honestly, nothing makes me happier! Again, I apologise if I didn't feature your response on the podcast, but I had so many. If you'd like to have a chance to participate in future episodes, you can follow me on Instagram @the\_community\_library, or you can follow me @angourierice, but I hang out more on The Community Library. As always, you can find a full transcription of this episode on my website, [angourieslibrary.com](http://angourieslibrary.com). We will meet back here in two weeks' time to talk about ... well, I don't exactly want to give it away yet, but here's a clue: *Beauty is in the eye of the beholder*. See if you can figure that one out. I'll of course be dropping more hints throughout the next two weeks on Instagram. Until then, I hope you're all taking good care of yourselves, and finding more great books to read before the end of the year. Bye.

[theme music fade out]