

5.14 Isolation Reads (Again)

Angourie [host]

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the Tongva tribes as the first people of the land on which this work was developed and is presented.

[theme music fades in]

Angourie [host]

Hello and welcome back to The Community Library; a fortnightly podcast all about stories, and how and why we tell them. I'm your host, Angourie Rice.

[theme music fades out]

Angourie [host]

What does one do when one is confined to a single room for seven days? This is something we asked ourselves a lot at the beginning of 2020, and two years into the pandemic, this question has become a bit of a novelty for me, now. The last time I was in a government-mandated lockdown was September of last year. So it was strange to return to my old friend, home isolation, when I was identified as a close contact of someone with COVID-19. As per government requirements, I stayed at home for seven days. And what did I do? Well, I read books. If you haven't been here before, welcome! I'm Angourie, I'm an actor and podcaster, and I live in Melbourne: one of the most locked down cities in the world with 262 days of lockdown. I wasn't there for all of it, but I was there for a lot of it, and I've also done two stints in hotel quarantine, one 14-day home quarantine, and now 7 days close contact isolation. So I'm pretty practiced at this isolation thing. But to be quite frank, at this point I've lost all energy I once had for analysing the emotional effects of lockdown. I have no uplifting, meaningful message for you. It is what it is. What I do have for you, though, is five brilliant books I read over my 7 day isolation.

***Five Go Adventuring Again* by Enid Blyton, 1943**

Okay well I guess here's a bit of an analysis for you: when confronted with isolation, I tend to turn to childhood favourites. Even at the very beginning of the pandemic, I started rereading Harry Potter, and Percy Jackson, and I got into a very deep into a Twilight phase. But this time I went back even further, and read from Enid Blyton's *Famous Five* series. This was a favourite of mine when I was about six or seven years old. This is a children's book series comprised of around 30 books, and it's about four children and a dog solving mysteries surrounding their holiday house at Kirrin Bay, and the nearby Kirrin Island. It's very wholesome and very of its time. This particular one I read was the second book in the series; never my favourite, because it was set over winter, but I still enjoyed it. Despite its old-fashioned-ness, there are still some pretty interesting things about this series. One of the children is Georgina, a girl who has short hair and dresses like a boy, and will only answer by the name George. She doesn't ask people to use he/him pronouns — that was not really a thing in the 1940s — but she delights when she is mistaken for a boy, and she frequently wishes she were a boy, both out loud and in her internal monologue. I'm

sometimes hesitant to label the queer identities of people and book characters from the past, because the vocabulary was very different. In the case of George in *The Famous Five*, I think she is a character who can definitely be read queer, and there is much textual evidence for it. I wasn't able to find much scholarship about it, but I did find a few subreddit threads suggesting George was trans. I also found an article titled "The 5 cultural icons that shaped my identity as a gay woman" in which the author reminisced about the 90s TV series adaptation of *The Famous Five*, and how the actress who played George was one of her first crushes. I find George the most interesting character in this story, not only because of her perceived queerness in the 1940s, but also because she has a distinct character arc, which none of the other characters have. George is a rebellious and troublesome child, who seems to enjoy the company of only her dog, Timmy. She doesn't like to share, whether that's places, or things, or information about herself. Perhaps it's because her mother doesn't understand her, or because her father, when he isn't ignoring George, only admonishes her for her boyish behaviour. Poor George isn't mean, she's simply lonely and misunderstood, and throughout the course of the first book and, subsequently, the whole series, George learns to trust, and share, and accept support from others. All this being said, there are other, more recent books out there that do this better. Books with openly queer characters and more in-depth discussions of what it's like to feel lonely as a kid. *The Famous Five* is old-fashioned, and though I enjoy it a lot, and it offers some insight to what I learnt and loved as a kid, it perhaps doesn't offer much to the modern reader other than nostalgia.

***Death Sets Sail* by Robin Stevens, 2020**

Though I moved on childhood nostalgia, I didn't move on from reading books for children. *Death Sets Sail* is the ninth and final book in Robin Stevens' *Murder Most Unladylike* series; a middle-grade murder mystery series set in the 1930s. Thirteen-year-olds Daisy and Hazel are amateur sleuths, solving cases of missing ties at their English boarding school, but the first book kicks off when they are faced with a real murder at their school, and the girls are determined to solve it. From then on, Daisy and Hazel find themselves in eight more predicaments of murder, kidnappings, and missing persons, ending with the final mystery set on a cruise on the Nile. Basically, it's Agatha Christie for kids. I've talked about this series before, and how much I love it. Because though this series is for kids, the mysteries are no less complicated or clever. I've been fooled almost every single time. What this series has to offer is its 21st Century sensibilities. It's queer and diverse, and Robin Stevens takes care to not fall into the harmful language and stereotypes that plague so many other mystery novels actually written in the 1930s. The books address racist and homophobic attitudes of the time, while also allowing her characters dignity and development in their identities. It's a fine balance to strike, especially with a series for and about tweens, but I think Robin Stevens does it really well. If you're Golden Age of Crime enthusiast, like I am, then I recommend it as a modern reimagining. It offers the same thrill as a Christie, plus positive representation and just generally wholesome content. And even if you're not a murder mystery reader, I still recommend it for the young tween in your life, maybe, or just for anyone who needs respite from big grown up novels.

***Every Heart a Doorway* by Seanan McGuire, 2016**

If you've spent a medium amount of time on the bookish side of the internet, you've probably heard of Seanan McGuire. She is a prolific and celebrated author of YA and Adult books, including the now seven-book series *Every Heart a Doorway*. There are three more books planned, it's gonna be a ten-book series. She's most well-known for her blending of reality and fantasy into speculative fiction, and I really like speculative fiction, so even though I'm so late to the party that the lights are on and they're sweeping up confetti, I decided to give this book a go. *The Every Heart a Doorway* series centres on Eleanor West's Home for Wayward children, a school for kids who have gone to magical worlds and then come back. In the first book we follow Nancy, who has come from an Underworld of sorts, and while she is trying to make friends and readjust to life in the human world, a mystery begins to unfold at the school. I think the concept for this book series is really clever, because it hinges on just a single question: of all those stories about children who fall into magical worlds, what happens to those who come back? And what I loved most about the book was McGuire's exploration of this question. These kids are united in a deep-rooted discomfort in this world, because they don't just feel — they know they belong in another. That's something I really love: through the framing of fantasy, an author is able to explore deeply explore these heightened emotions many of us deal with. The mystery element to this book is, I think, less successful, possibly because of the short page number. It wasn't as developed, and wrapped up very quickly. But it was at least intriguing, and I loved the gothic feel that it brought. In a way, this book felt a little parallel to how I was feeling in isolation. I've done isolation and quarantine and lockdown so many times now, that it feels familiar. I wouldn't say it feels normal, never normal, but familiar, for sure. But no matter how familiar the world of isolation gets, I always know that I truly belong in a different one: the outside world.

Someone at a Distance by Dorothy Whipple, 1953

Get ready, because you think I enjoyed those first three books? They're nothing compared to these last two, which were not only the favourites I read this week, but could make it into my favourites of the year, and possibly favourites of all time. *Someone at a Distance* is published by Persephone Books, a British independent publishing house committed to publishing works by forgotten women writers of the 20th Century. Forgotten women writers of the 20th Century also happens to be one of my mum's favourite sub genres, and so we have a small collection of Persephone books at home, and I bought her another for Christmas last year. The premise of *Someone at a Distance* is very simple. Louise, a young woman from a small town in France, is hired as a companion for a rich elderly lady in the English countryside. Over her months working for the old Mrs. North, Louise becomes entangled with the rest of the family: the sophisticated publisher Mr. North, his perfect housewife, and their handsome son and spirited daughter. It's a very uncomplicated, somewhat predictable plot, and yet, this book stirred up so much discussion in our house, with my mum, dad, and me all having read it, and all wanting to say how we felt about it. Because the plot is not what keeps you engaged as a reader; it's the characters, their difficult situations, the decisions they have to make, the conversations they have, and how you, as a reader, might pass judgement on them. It's almost like Dorothy Whipple had people she wanted to write about, rather than a story she wanted to tell. Because the people in this book are so painfully, upsettingly real. There was one point at which I had to actually stop reading and watch an episode of *New Girl* because a particular character had

made me so angry, and I didn't know what to do with all this rage that I had for someone who wasn't even real, and so I distracted myself with TV, of course. *Someone at a Distance* is a really a marvel of great writing and character work. It's simple, but it's effective, and after reading three books in a row with mystery elements, it was pleasant to read a book knowing that I wasn't reading it because I needed to see how it ended — I had a very good idea of how it was going to end — but simply because I loved the experience of getting there.

***Kindred* by Octavia E. Butler, 1979**

I think I saved the best for last. Accidentally. *Kindred* wasn't a book I considered to be very high up on my list of books to read. But after *Someone at a Distance*, I was looking for something a fast-paced and adventurous, and perhaps with a little bit of magic. *Kindred* is heralded as the first sci-fi book written by a black woman. It's about a woman named Dana living in 1976, who is suddenly thrust back in time to the antebellum south in the early 1800s. She quickly realises the reason she's been sent back: to save her white ancestor from dying, so he can continue the line that eventually leads to her. Going back and forth in time, Dana must navigate life as a slave to her white ancestors. But this book is really a character study dressed up as an historical sci-fi, which is why I loved it. Dana first meets Rufus, her ancestor, when he is five years old and she saves him from downing. He is a sweet and caring boy, but as he grows up, he must take over his father's plantation, including charge of the enslaved workers. Through Dana and Rufus's relationship, Butler explores intersections of race, gender, and of course, more than one hundred and fifty years' time difference. My favourite theme in this book is a quiet one that creeps up on you, and isn't fully realised until the very end, so I don't really want to talk about for fear of spoiling it. But the way Butler crafts these characters is so special — and part of it is revealed in the book's title. Dana and Rufus are separated by so many differences, but they are inextricably connected because each other's life depends on the other. Rufus will die without Dana there to save him, and if Dana doesn't save him and lets him die, she will cease to exist. It's a tangled and emotional character drama, with the added bonus of time travel. Be warned, this book gets very dark towards the end, but it's so powerful and so well-written.

My goal this year was to read books I genuinely believe I will enjoy, and to not finish any books that I'm not enjoying. Simply: I'm just here to have a good time. And despite not being able to see my family for one of the few precious weeks I was at home, at least I read some good books, and at least I got to share them with you. And I did other things in iso, as well. I also watched some great movies and TV shows, and I played wordle and quordle every day. And I know I can do 7 days in isolation at the drop of a hat — as I said, it's familiar to me now. But even though it did wonders for my ever-growing list of books to read, I'd be happy to not do it again for a while. I hope you're all keeping safe and well, and reading good books, and I'll chat to you in two weeks' time. Bye!

[theme music]