

2.6 From Dickens to Woolf: What is a Classic?

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.

[theme music]

Angourie (host)

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

[theme music]

Angourie (host)

Happy December, everyone! The weather is getting colder – unless, like the rest of my family and friends, you live in Australia, in which case it's getting much hotter. But, the holiday season is upon us and with it always brings some sort of nostalgia that makes me want to go back and read old books. Which is why I've decided that this month's theme is Classics! Our discussion pick for this month was chosen by you, the audience! I asked you what classic you wanted to read in December, and the winner was *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott. This is a classic American novel that begins at Christmas time, so it's very fitting. So this week, to start off the discussion of classics, I want to talk about what the label of "classic" actually means. But, before I do, I want to tell you about what I'm currently reading.

At the moment I'm reading three books. The first is *Eclipse* by Stephenie Meyer, which I've almost finished. I'm at the part where Bella is in the woods in the snow while the Cullens and the werewolves are fighting the army of new-born vampires and Victoria. And right now Bella is sleeping and she's cuddled up to Jacob while Edward looks on mournfully, 'cause, like, she can't be close to him 'cause he's cold and Jacob's really warm. It's the funniest scene I've read so far. The interesting thing about the *Twilight* series for me is that I'm not sure if it gives me intense pain or intense joy. I don't like the writing style, I find it very repetitive. I don't like any of the characters, Bella especially. I don't think it's a love story, I actually think Edward is possessive and manipulative, and it's an abusive relationship. There are also multiple facets of the story that don't make sense to me? But despite all of my criticism, I can't stop listening to it. I'm listening to it on audio, and I listen to it when I'm cooking, or cleaning, or brushing my teeth, or just, like, pottering about the apartment. And it's addictive, and I'm definitely gonna read the last book, and then I won't know what to do with my life. And I'm so invested in where the story goes, even though I've seen the movies. And I just – I can't wait to get to the part where Bella has a child and then Jacob imprints on it, because that is gonna be hilarious. So ... that's my journey [laughs] that's my *Twilight* journey so far.

I'm also reading a book from the Book of the Month subscription box. I chose to receive *The Great Pretender* by Susannah Cahalan. This is a non-fiction book about an experiment that was done in the 70s where eight perfectly healthy people pretended to be insane and committed themselves into mental hospitals. Once inside, they dropped all pretences and had to prove themselves sane in order to get out. So it's about this study, but it's also about the author's own struggles with the mental health care system, and how mental illness and physical illness are treated so differently in society. I'm enjoying it so far, I'm about 100 pages in, but it's quite dry, and it's definitely not a light read. Um, I really have to concentrate while reading it, and it's not something I want to read right before I go to bed, 'cause it's quite, um, upsetting. But it is really interesting and I'm learning lots of new things.

The third book I'm reading is *Emma* by Jane Austen. After last week's episode, I was reminded by how much I love the story, and it's just a comfort read for me – I read it this time last year, as well. Maybe it's something about the colder weather. It just instantly makes me smile when I read it, and it gives me such a warm and fluffy feeling inside. This time I'm not reading my really nice, ah, Vintage Paperback copy, but I'm reading a cheap copy that I got for, like, 10 bucks so I'm underlining some of my favourite quotes, or things that I find funny. So I'm really enjoying reading that, it's just making me very happy.

If you want to let me know what you're currently reading, you can tag me on Instagram @the_community_library, or you can use the hashtag #thecommunitylibrary. I would love to see what you're reading, if you're enjoying it, if you're not enjoying it. But for now, let's get into the episode.

So, I have always really loved the "classics" genre, and I've spoken about this before; I love how it makes me feel so connected to history. I don't get that same feeling from reading history books or reading historical fiction. I think there's something so special about reading a novel that's set in the time it was written. Everything in it is so true and authentic and pulled from the author's experience of living in that time. I love looking at things that have changed and things that haven't.

But when I was preparing for this episode, and this whole theme of "classics", I asked myself the question: what is a classic? And this is not a new question, this has crossed the minds of many literary scholars and authors like T. S. Eliot and Mark Twain. But I decided to ignore the writings of people who have dedicated years of research to this topic, and instead I went on an adventure to understand it myself.

I decided to start at the very beginning, because, as Maria von Trapp says, it's a very good place to start. In the true sense of the word, "classics" or "classical studies" is the study of classical antiquity, i.e. the Greco-Roman world. So in this case, Homer's *Iliad* is, truly, a classic. – though it's not really a novel, it's more of an epic poem. Same with the plays of Sophocles and Euripides, they are classics. But now, classic novels mean something else. And so this just led to more questions: What novels deserve the label of "classic"? Are classics commercial successes, or are they books that win lots of awards? Or are they both?

So I decided to consult the oracle, also known as the internet. And all I had to do was type in "list of classic novels" and multiple articles came up titled 100 CLASSICS TO READ BEFORE

YOU DIE and THE 50 GREATEST NOVELS OF ALL TIME. Lots of stuff like that. And, when I was looking through all these lists, many of the same titles popped up: Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* and Dickens, always Dickens. But this wasn't enough for me. I decided to consult another oracle, also known as my Instagram followers. So, on Instagram I posted this question: When I say "classic novel", what's the first one that comes to mind? I tallied up all the answers, there were some great suggestions, but these were the top five answers: *Pride and Prejudice* by Jane Austen, with 25 votes. *Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë and *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, both with 12 votes. *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee, with 11 votes. And *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley, with 9 votes. And then, you know, the list continued on. with 6 votes we had *Little Women*, the *Odyssey*, *Wuthering Heights*. 4 votes we had *Great Expectations*, *A Tale of Two Cities*. With 3 votes we had *Lord of the Flies*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. 2 votes: *Of Mice and Men*, *Dracula*, *Lord of the Rings*.

But back to our top five: *Pride and Prejudice*, *Jane Eyre*, *The Great Gatsby*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and *Frankenstein*. All of these books were also mentioned in the countless articles that I read listing the greatest classics of all time. And so, by compiling both the audiences' answers, lists from around the web, and some of my own suggestions, I came up with a flexible list of classics – if that even makes sense. I won't read out the whole list that I came up with, because it's pretty boring, but I'll just give you an overview of what it looked like, and what the most notable and most mentioned titles were.

I ordered my list chronologically, so we started with Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, both written around 1260 – 1180 BCE. But I wonder if even these two works would be considered classics because they're not really novels. Then there was a big gap, through to the early 19th Century with novelists like Austen and Shelley, and then the mid-to-late 19th century was when authors began writing the works that are now most commonly known as the true classics. We had the Brontë sisters in the 1840s, Dickens' *Great Expectations* in 1861, Tolstoy's *War and Peace* in 1869, and George Eliot's *Middlemarch* in 1872. Then in the late 19th Century we've got Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* and Bram Stoker's Gothic novel *Dracula*. And then moving into the 20th Century, we've got what I would consider "modern classics". The 20s saw F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. In the 30s and 40s we had Steinbeck and Orwell, and then in the 60s, a whole new era of modern classics; fiction that was pushing the boundaries of the conventions at the time: Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton – the latter of which defined an era of young adult fiction.

And after I had compiled this list, I asked myself what all of these novels had in common. Why was it that these titles were mentioned again and again in relation to one another, when some of them were written hundreds of years apart? And they cover such a broad range of topics: from a science experiment gone wrong, to a man obsessed with a green light, to teenage boys who accidentally commit a murder. What makes all of these novels stand the test of time? Maybe they all capture some universal truth that connects us all, regardless of what decade or century we live in. So I came up with this definition: a classic is a novel over 50 years old that covers topics and themes that transcend time. It's a book that readers connected with at the time of its release, and one that readers have continued

connecting with throughout history. It's a book that finds that human and universal truth that connects us all.

But if this is true, then what is that truth that they all have? What is the one universal message that connects all of these novels? Is it that rich people are unhappy? That you shouldn't judge a book by its cover? That vanity is the worst sin? That the American Dream isn't real? That love always wins? And, another question: is it enough for a book to capture this truth to become a classic? I think this is where it becomes complicated, because who is to say that a novel is inherently "good"? A book becoming a classic is decided not only by the relatability and timelessness of its content, but also by the surrounding social context. Since the beginning of art, certain groups of people have decided what is "good" and what isn't. So, a novel's inherent value and relatability is completely relative. If *To Kill a Mockingbird* was written in 1885, it wouldn't have become a classic, but it wouldn't have even been published, or written. The culture of the 1960s made space for such a book to be written, and when it was written, the culture decided that it was "good" and deserved popularity and acclaim.

I'm not gonna sit here and ignore the fact that all of these "classics" are written by white people. All of these classics follow certain story conventions that are popular and accepted in Western European culture. These classics cover such a small scope of perspective and identity – so maybe they're actually not "relatable" and "timeless" at all? These stories have been considered important and labelled as "classics" throughout history because they are written by and cater to an audience of rich white people.

So now I question my definition of the classic novel, because what if there isn't an element of universal truth in any of these novels? Maybe I just believe that because the universal truth that has been sold to me comes in the form of novels written by and told from the perspective of affluent white people. And I have always been the target audience for these classics, too. I'm white, middle class, non-disabled, and a product of a British colony. So maybe these are biases within myself that make me feel so connected to these classic works of fiction. Biases that need to be acknowledged and deconstructed. Because, after all, these stories could have about my ancestors.

But as time goes on, I believe our definition of a classic is actually changing, and I think that's a good thing. So what's it becoming? What stories of our time will be the classics of the future? There are a few that came to my mind first: the *Harry Potter* series being one. Another one I immediately thought of – and, a more recent release, is *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas. Also in the YA genre, I think John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars* was a book that defined the 2010s. But of course, I, again, consulted the oracle for some more literary adult fiction. Again, I found many articles titled 20 BOOKS THAT WILL BECOME FUTURE CLASSICS! And some frequently mentioned books were *The Life of Pi* by Yann Martel, *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro, and *Atonement* by Ian McEwan. Also, most of the lists included one or multiple works from Haruki Murakami and Zadie Smith. And to me, these novels show how broad the scope of fiction is now. And the literary space, though it still has a long way to go, is slowly becoming more accessible and inclusive. And maybe with this new perspective on inclusivity and

making space for writers that have been ignored for so long, maybe that's when we'll reach that universal truth that we're all looking for.

As much as I criticise the culture of classic literature, I do think it's important to recognise and learn from the past. There are so many things from classic works of fiction that permeate our culture today: there is nothing new under the sun. We recycle and reinvent old ideas – but I don't think that's a bad thing. For me, I think it's important to look to the past to understand the present and to create a new future. But I also think that now, people are finally listening to those whose stories and histories that have been lost or ignored in the past. And because we have that new insight, we can better understand how to move forward, and ensure that stories today aren't lost or ignored.

That's all I have to say on the subject of classics for now. I think my discussion probably asked more questions than it gave answers, but hopefully it gave you something to think about. This month I've got some really interesting episodes lined up: next week I have a discussion on Shakespeare starring a very special guest, and the week after that my sister and I are going to talk about *Little Women* by Louisa May Alcott. So, please read along so you can join in the discussion! It's gonna be very fun and probably very silly. As always, I will have a full transcription of this episode available on my blog, www.angourieslibrary.wordpress.com

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