**Recently Returned**

**Young Adult Takeover**

**s03e03**

[Start of recorded material at 00:00:00]

Voice Over: The opinions expressed during this podcast are the individual's own and do not represent those of Wyndham City Council.

[Music plays]

Emily: Hello, and welcome to Recently Returned. My name is Emily and I'll be hosting this special episode of the podcast today. Today is going to be a youth team takeover in which we're going to be discussing some of our latest YA fiction reads. And today, I am joined by Carrie.

Respondent: Hi.

Emily: And Sophie.

Sophie: Hey there.

Emily: So, today we're going to be talking about two YA books each. We're going to be talking about something that we have read and something that we're currently reading. So to kick off the discussion, let's go straight into it. Sophie, would you like to tell us and what you have read?

Sophie: So I recently read *Can't Say it Went to Plan* by Gabrielle Tozer. So it follows the point of view of three young people, Zoe, Samira and Dahlia and they have just finished Year 12 and they're off to Schoolies in Queensland. One of the strengths I think of the book is that all of those characters are quite different. There's a diversity of experiences. Zoe is this high achiever. She wants to be a doctor. She has an older sister who is also a really big high achiever and there's a bit of competitiveness or feelings of inadequacy and her parents are quite strict.

The first chapter is she's getting ready. She's going to Schoolies with her cousins. She's from an Italian migrant family, and as someone who is from a migrant family having strict parents, I'm like, "Yes, I can relate to this. This is a real problem," [laughs], a real challenge I think for young people and her mum changes her mind at the last minute and she's really upset. But her parents go out to work and she decides no, so she busts out and she catches up with her cousins and she leaves for Schoolies in this rebellion against her parents.

And then Samira is – we learn that she hasn't been at her school long. I think she just went there for Year 12. She's got a group of friends. She's super organised. She's colour coded all of the activities and she's organised the whole thing and she's got this boyfriend, and you can tell she's in this popular clique. But her boyfriend dumps her just before they get on the train to go, so it's heartbreaking.

 Then with Dahlia, she's going with her two friends and they're going because ... they're going to Schoolies because they want to go to Schoolies, but their group used to be four. So one of their group, she recently died from cancer, so they're doing it for their friend, but Dahlia has a lot of anxiety and is managing it.

 So yeah, we follow them through the couple of days and it's the classic coming of age. Zoe's coming to terms with how she feels about her sister and about her achievements, and then Samira realises that her boyfriend was a chump and she actually makes really good friends with her Schoolies neighbours and ends up spending time with them. And yeah, Dahlia works through her anxiety.

 Yeah look, I did enjoy it. It's very sweet. It was something fun and light, even though it did have some darker things, especially with Dahlia, and they all have their Schoolies flings. And there's a diversity of sexuality as well. It's not just all straight characters. There are queer characters as well.

But one thing I did find a little bit unconvincing, I guess – but I'm hoping this is just my cynicism – is that Dahlia's friends were so understanding and articulate in helping her through her anxiety and I just thought, "I don't know many 18-year-olds who could've dealt with their friend with that sensitivity," especially as they are also grieving for the loss of their friend, because a lot of Dahlia's anxiety stems from this loss. So yeah, I think it did a good job in maybe giving young people a model for something to arm them if they did come across a situation like that. But yeah, I just thought, "I don't really know how realistic that is." But yeah, look, if you're looking for a fun, light read, then yeah, definitely give it a go.

Emily: Yeah, that sounds great. Thanks, Sophie. I like the idea of – even though you said that the way that the characters dealt with Dahlia's anxiety was a little bit not quite believable, I think it's good that, as you pointed out, young people can read it and use that as a tool to go, "Oh, if I'm experiencing anxiety or if I have a friend who's going through this, this is how I can talk to them and respond to them." Yeah, I think that's a good aspect of YA fiction, is that we can learn a lot from the young people's experiences in the story.

Sophie: Yeah, for sure, and at the end – because Gabrielle Tozer, she's an Australian author, she puts some information about Beyond Blue and all that stuff, realising that it could be triggering for some people or, as you say, put a friend or family member into their mind after reading that. So yeah, had some really good resources, and I will say, it did all of that stuff without being too preachy. It didn't feel like you were being lectured to. It was just a nice story.

Emily: Thanks, Sophie. Carrie, would you like to tell us what you have read recently?

Carrie: Yeah so, recently, I read *Four Dead Queens* by Astrid Scholte, and I thought this one was a really quirky and light-hearted novel. I was concerned at first that it would be a typical young adult fiction with the conspiracy and murder and another love triangle. But this one just had no love in it at all. It focused all on the conspiracy at hand which I thought was really nice. This one is Astrid's debut novel, which is really cute. I think the strengths of this book is all the characters were really relatable. They were quirky and you really got to know them.

 The novel starts with 17-year-old Keralie and she is a skilled thief within the nation, which is Quadara, and this nation is divided and ruled by four individual queens. There are no kings, so it's a queendom, which is another amazing feat. I would have to say one of the weaknesses of the book is it did seem that some of our LGBT characters were featured in the novel were squashed, but that added, I think, to highlighting their trials and tribulations of coming forward and breaking down the barriers of something that was put in place centuries before them, so queenly law in this case.

 The novel is told from multiple perspectives with Keralie's being the main perspective. So it does switch and swap so you get to see what is happening in the present moment, and then you get to find out what led up ... so the three to four days prior to what led up to the event happening in this case; each individual queen being murdered. So you're seeing how that came about and then also trying to connect many, many different dots all at once.

 What I really, really also liked about it is trying to predict where it would head, so trying to connect the dots, and then having that completely swept out under my feet, and then finding that I'm laughing my head off at these really irrelevant parts of the book where I thought, "Why am I even laughing? This is hilarious." So I just think those things were really, really well timed and came together very nicely.

 Trying to get a sense of the context around the story and in describing queenly law was a little bit challenging at times. But then as the story came together and you got drabs of information, it came together and you were able to relate to the characters. I also liked that Astrid made you draw those assumptions together. She didn't spend chapters on describing scenery and how it was laid out or where you only got your information from the characters themselves. So I thought that was a really good perspective. So yeah, overall, just a really nice, light-hearted conspiracy that just kept me guessing what would happen and yeah, definitely just laughing at those irrelevant moments.

Emily: That sounds really good. I've had my eye on that book for a while because I'm such a sucker for YA fantasy, but I definitely would not have guessed that there was this quirkiness and humour that you mentioned.

Carrie: Yeah, it just surprised me. I thought it was going to be straightforward, A to B, Cluedo style; I would be able to figure it out. And I'm like, "Why does she mention this or that?" and then you read ahead a bit and you're like, "Oh," and everything just comes together. I'm glad I didn't just go, "What am I reading here? I'm going to put it down." But yeah, persisted through. So yeah, it was nice to just focus around what was presented to me in the moment. I did think at first, reading different perspectives would trip me over, especially with so many. There was the four queens, plus two main characters. But getting to know them was really good. I'm sad in a way that it's not a series, but really happy that she didn't drag it out.

Emily: Wow, so it's just a standalone novel?

Carrie: Yeah, just a standalone.

Emily: Yeah, which in itself, it seems so rare nowadays especially in the fantasy realm. I always expect there to be multiple sequels.

Carrie: Yeah.

Emily: That's awesome. Thank you, Carrie. Yeah, so I have read I recently *Carry On* by Rainbow Rowell.

Sophie: I love that book so much.

Emily: Yeah. I remember you saying that you read it.

Carrie: I can't wait to read it.

Sophie: So good. The reveal in the middle; I squealed. Anyway, please continue.

Emily: So I read this book upon recommendation by a friend, and I had – *Carry On* was one of those books that I'd seen around in the library and I'd heard of Rainbow Rowell as a really popular YA fiction author, but I'd never read any of her books. So I was excited to finally read something of hers. So a bit of the background behind *Carry On* is that – so it's like an adventure, fantasy, comedy, romance, and it centres around a magical school and the protagonist is called Simon Snow and he is the chosen one in this magical world. This world and this character actually features in Rainbow Rowell's – one of her previous books, *Fangirl*, in which the main characters, Cath, writes fan fiction about Simon Snow and his magical world. So Rainbow Rowell has taken that fictional character and given him his own book. So it's levels upon levels –

Sophie: But did you know that *Carry On* is basically *Harry Potter* fan fiction?

Emily: Yes.

Sophie: Yeah, yeah [laughs]. It's very meta.

Emily: Yes, 100 percent, but with a few interesting twists which make it really enjoyable. So speaking of some of those twists and differences, first of all, there's a queer love story at the centre of this book, and the way that it unfolds is I found it really engrossing and really exciting, was one of my favourite things about the book. And it also follows the enemies-to-lovers trope, and I think it handled that really well. Speaking of that quirky humour that Carrie, you mentioned in the book that you read, *Carry On* has a lot of humour, very, very funny, laugh-out-loud funny, and there's also a bit of mystery at the centre of it. So basically, it follows Simon through his final year of magic school. It's called the Watford School of Magics, and you learn that Simon, he's a bit of a hopeless wizard, although they don't use the term "wizard". Sophie, do you remember what term they use?

Sophie: No. I read it a really long time ago, so my memory and the specifics is hazy. But yeah, he's not the most gifted student that they have, yeah.

Emily: But despite not being very good at the magic, he has been prophesised as the chosen one that will bring balance back to the magical and defeat evil, and he has this underlying power that bursts out of him unexpectedly and he can't quite control it, and that's how he has managed to escape from his so many near-death experiences over the past years of schooling. So he's starting his final year of school. Like Harry Potter, he is an orphan and doesn't have any family, but he has really close connections with his friends at school. He has a best friend, Penny, and a girlfriend Agatha. But he also has this growing obsession with his roommate, with Baz, and when Baz doesn't turn up for school at the start of the year and doesn't come to school for weeks, Simon starts to wonder what could've possibly happened to him, and that's one of the narrative threads that kicks off the plot that I found really engrossing.

 I loved the romance, the humour and the mystery. One thing that I did notice is that even though it's set in England, I could tell that it was written by an American author because of some of the phrases that the characters say, but funnily enough, Rainbow Rowell actually points this out in her acknowledgements and says that if the characters sound American, it's despite the efforts of her English colleagues who helped her to try and refine the voice and make it sound as English as possible. But yeah, having said that, that's a small thing to note in what, on the whole, is a really entertaining book.

Sophie: Maybe I should reread *Carry On*, so good, and now because she's relatively recently released the next book, yeah.

Emily: Yeah, I'm really excited to read it. So *Carry On* was published in 2015, but there is a sequel called *Wayward Son* and a third book in the trilogy called *Any Way the Wind Blows*, and that just came out I think just a couple of weeks ago, really recently. So yeah, I'm really excited to read the others and continue on the Simon Snow journey.

Carrie: I can't wait to read it. It's on my to-do list. It sounds really exciting.

Sophie: She's a really good writer. I really like *Eleanor & Park*. I read that in one sitting because it was just so lovely. Yeah, I recommend that as well.

Emily: Well, we might move onto books that we are currently reading. Sophie, what are you currently reading at the moment?

Sophie: So I am reading *The River Has Teeth* by Erica Waters and it's set in Tennessee and yeah, it's told between two points of view. Bella, who is a local witch, and comes from a long line of witches, and they live near a river. They call it the Bend, and that's the source of their power. So her great-great-great-grandmother imbued the Bend with her power when she died. And yeah, so generations of her family have manifested the power from the river in different ways so Bella can – sorry, Bella, Della – Della can make things – she can make things grow. So if she can feel a seed in the soil, she can make it grow into the flower or the tree.

 And you find out pretty early on that her mother has been transformed by the river because the power has gone a bit awry; something's wrong with the power there. And so, she turned into this river siren, so when the sun goes down, she turns into this monster that is really dangerous and volatile and really powerful. She's locked her into this abandoned prison to keep her away from causing harm.

 And then the other point of view is Natasha. So Natasha is a young person who lives a few towns over from Della, and she's been adopted by a wealthy family. Again, they've got roots in their town going back generations, but her sister goes missing, and she crosses paths with Della because she wants to find her missing sister.

 I will say I did get halfway through and I decided, "I'm not going to finish this book." I think there are lots of great things about it. I think if it had been told solely from Della's point of view, I would've enjoyed it a lot more. I just found the character of Natasha really difficult to relate to. But having said that, it is really atmospheric. I really liked the way Erica Waters writes, especially the way that she describes the magic. Even though it is set in contemporary Tennessee, there is still a little bit of world building going on, and she does that really well. And yeah, you are interested to know what's happening next. But yeah, like I said, all of the juicy interest is with Della and her world of magic. Yeah, some good things, but unfortunately, not something that I would really recommend.

Emily: Yeah, that's totally understandable. I sometimes get that frustration with books when I'm halfway through them, and there's that dilemma of, "Oh, do I keep reading or do I just stop?" Yeah, it's such a hard thing to decide.

Sophie: Yeah, because you feel like you've committed. It's like, "Well, I've gotten this far. Do I just keep going?"

Emily: Thanks, Sophie. Carrie, can you tell us a bit about what you're currently reading?

Carrie: I also got a – this one is *Ash Princess* by Laura Sebastian, and this is the first of three books; the second and third being *Lady Smoke* and *Ember Queen*. So I'm about halfway through reading this book maybe, around abouts there, three-quarters-ish, and it's darker than I expected. So it has an historical feel this one. So this was Laura's debut novel of 2018 and it follows the story of a girl name Theodosia. She is obviously a princess and her mother, the ruling queen, was murdered. The land was taken over by another kingdom when she was only six and these were the Kaiser, which allowed – they allowed her to live.

So this historical feel has come into it, the Mary, Queen of Scots feel. So you already get the sense that this is going to be an earlier period of time, so talking colonising and setting up, so these harder scenes were going to come up. So things like racism, enslaving, abuse, torture, beating, murder, death, loss of a loved one, bullying, discussions surrounding rape are all part of these things, although I will mention they aren't very graphic or overly explicit. So just, yeah, darker than I was expecting.

 Basically, the Kaiser conquered the land because there are these caves that run underneath four main temples that the people worship, so earth, air, fire and water. The gems that come out from the caves give people magic, but they can also – [when their mind? 00:23:10] can send people completely insane, so if they spend too long down there with the power. So as I said, it's a dark story about Theodosia who's forced to live among her own people who ruined her own life and killed her mother. But there's also that lighter side. Now, while a lot of books in YA fiction have a vague, blurry love triangle, the one featured in this one is just blatant, and I liked that they just put it out there, and you could just focus on their growth.

So it is a relationship between herself and her childhood friend, Blaise, and the boy's father was one who took everything from her. So it's really friends to lovers to enemies to lovers all over again. So while it's not ground-breaking or unique, I just found it really well written and crafted. And while it is taking me longer to read, I don't really want to put it down. I love the characters so far, the twists and the plots that I've been presented with. I just find the atmosphere of the overall writing really well done and I have pulled out a quote from this one that I liked: "We are not defined by the things we do in order to survive." So I'm looking forward to finishing that one and hopefully picking up the next one.

Emily: So how many books are there in this series?

Carrie: Three so far. I'm not sure if there's going to be a fourth; maybe.

Emily: It's great that you definitely feel compelled to finish the book and to read the others as well.

Carrie: Yeah. Despite the hardness, I think now that I've done a little bit of research and I can see where the author is coming from, it does make it a little bit easier to digest.

Emily: Would you say that this – does this book fall into the YA category that's for older readers?

Carrie: I would think so. I don't think I would recommend it to a 12-year-old; maybe a bit more higher up on the spectrum, like 15, 16, just so that if you're prepared going in surrounding some of the scenes and content, I think it's fine. I think if you're not prepared for it and you feel a bit blindsided, it can really throw you off foot a bit.

Emily: Thanks, Carrie.

Sophie: And Emily, tell us, what's on your reading list?

Emily: Yes. Well, this book, it was on my current reading list, however I finished reading it. So the book that I have recently finished reading is called *Kingdom of the Wicked* and it's by Kerri Maniscalco. And I was really, really excited to read this book just from reading the summary of what it's about. So it's set in Sicily in the 19th century and it follows the story of Emilia who has a twin sister called Vittoria. And the two of them are known as strega, which is the Italian term for "witches". So they come from a long line of witches.

 One night, however, Vittoria is murdered horrifically, and so it sets off Emilia on this – it sets her off on a path to find out who killed her and why, and as well as witchcraft, there are demons involved. And so, I read this and I was like, "This sounds like my ideal book," and –

Sophie: Yeah, it sounds great.

Emily: Yeah, and there'd been a lot of hype around it. I'd heard a lot of good reviews about it. So I have Italian background and so I was even more excited to read about all the Sicilian stuff, and I will say that all the Italian details in there are really wonderful. So it talks a lot about Italian folk magic, which is like little things that are done in order to deter the evil eye, or the Malocchio as it's called in Italian, and so the witchcraft in the novel takes that to the next level.

So Emilia and her sister wear these special charms or necklaces that are called cornicello and they are – it's basically a horn and you see them a lot in – or referred to a lot in Italian culture, and I always used to think that they were chillies because they're often red. I was like, "Why are there red chillies around all the time?" Yeah, but they're supposed to be horns to ward off the evil eye. So Emilia wears this necklace constantly and she's told to never take it off. And her mentor, I guess you could say, is her nonna, her grandmother, and she's a very important figure in the book, and that was really lovely to read as well.

So all of that I really liked. Also, there is some romance in the book as well, which I enjoyed, and I also really liked the dialogue between Emilia and the person who becomes the love interest who is actually a demon, a prince of hell, and we learn about the princes of hell in this book. So I found that really fascinating and I really liked his character as well.

But I had some issue with the book, and some of it disappointed me. First of all, I found the time period really unclear. I didn't realise that it was set in ye olde times until I was a couple of chapters in. I found that the writing was really quite modern, which isn't a bad thing, but it was so modern. The fact that it was set in the 19th century just completely went over my head. I didn't realise it at all.

I wanted more descriptions of the city and the vibrancy of the city. I found that I wanted more sensory descriptions of the smells and the sounds of the locations in the book. I felt that that was missing. And I also found the pacing hard to follow believably. I found that the action scenes came up really – they often came up really suddenly and they were quite jarring and they didn't flow very well, and I found them a bit hard to follow.

But having said that, a lot of people really like this book. I'm just one of I think a few people who may have had these issues with it. But overall, it's an enjoyable read and I'd recommend people to – who are interested in the witchcraft, Italian folk magic, if you're into that or interested in it, I highly recommend it. And you can read it and make your own opinions and see what you think.

Sophie: Yeah, I mean, I'm still interested to read it, because as you said, the premise is really promising. It sounds really interesting. But also, I didn't know that that was a horn. I feel like in Greek and Eastern European culture and in Turkish culture, they have the actual eye. So that's really cool that the Italians use a horn. Is it a horn of an animal?

Emily: Well, in the book, it links to the devil's horns, which is funny and ironic, because you're using the devil's horns to ward off the devil. So I think that's what it is, but I should consult with my family to really find out.

Carrie: See, I didn't know about the evil eye for a really long time, and I always found it [unintelligible? 00:31:29] in the window. So I like that you can have those different elements and cultural aspects to the book. So I think that was really interesting.

Emily: Yeah, I agree, and that was one of the things that I was really excited to read and having said all this, I would still like to read – there is a sequel. It's called *Kingdom of the Cursed* that came out this year. I am still interested to see what happens next in the story to read that one and to get even more of that Italian culture in there, because yeah, I haven't come across any really, at least in the fantasy – in the way of fantasy genre. So yeah, I found that really exciting.

Sophie: Yeah.

Emily: Well, thank you Sophie and Carrie for joining me for this YA fiction discussion, and thank you listeners for listening, and if you want more YA book recommendations and updates on all things YA at the library, you can follow us on Instagram at @librariesinwyndham. And one of the things that we do there regularly is we have a YA book of the week. So if you want more YA recommendations, I highly recommend that you check us out. So thanks for joining us and we'll see you again next time.

[End of recorded material at 00:32:49]