Recently Returned

Best Books of 2023

s05e01

KIRSTY: Hello and welcome to Recently Returned, the bookish podcast by Wyndham City Libraries.

I’m one of your hosts, Kirsty, and it is my sad duty to inform you that this is the final episode of the podcast. We’re going out with a bang though, so stay tuned for heaps of book recommendations.

Joining me today is Anita, whose voice you might recognise from previous episodes of the podcast. Anita, care to tell people what they’re in for with today’s episode?

ANITA: Thanks, Kirsty, and hello everyone. Well, today you’re in for a treat. We’re going to share the most borrowed items from our library collection in 2023, share some staff and public recommendations, and take a closer look at mine and Kirsty’s favourite reads from last year. Hopefully you’ll hear about your next read right here!

KIRSTY: I’ve had a sneak peek at the lists and I’ve definitely made some notes on things I want to read. Although, our most borrowed fiction title is part of a series so I’d probably have some work to do catching up with that one.

ANITA: Oh yeah?

KIRSTY: It’s *No Plan B* by Lee Child, which is the 27th book in the Jack Reacher series, written with his younger brother Andrew Child.

The second most borrowed fiction title of 2023 was *Lessons in Chemistry* by Bonnie Garmus if you are after something a bit more standalone.

ANITA: Speaking of books our borrowers love, one of our Wyndham readers Robyn rang in earlier this year and recommended The Personal Librarian by Marie Benedict. Thanks so much, Robyn. We love to hear what people have been reading.

KIRSTY: Absolutely. And that goes for you as well, Anita. I want to hear what your favourite read from last year was.

ANITA: Well, 2023 was a good reading year and I had quite a few to choose from but in the end the winner for me was *The Benevolent Society of Ill-Mannered Ladies* by Alison Goodman.

KIRSTY: Yay!

ANITA: The book follows the Colebrook twins Gus and her twin sister Julia who use their wits and invisibility as an 'old maids' to protect other women in this historical mystery-romance.

Gus, also known as Lady Augusta Colebrook is determinedly unmarried, bored by society life, and tired of being dismissed at the age of forty-two. Her twin sister, Julia, is grieving her dead betrothed. A distraction soon presents itself in the form of Caroline, their friend's goddaughter who needs rescuing from her violent husband.

The sisters set out to Caroline's country estate with a plan, but their carriage is accosted by a highwayman. It all sounds very intriguing at this stage, doesn’t it? And in that scuffle, Gus accidentally shoots the ruffian, only to discover he is Lord Evan Belford, an acquaintance from their past who was charged with murder and exiled to Australia twenty years ago. The plot thickens!

With Lord Evan injured and unconscious, the sisters have no choice but to bring him on their mission to save Caroline. What follows is a high adventure full of danger, clever improvisation, heart-racing near misses, and a little help from a revived and rather charming Lord Evan.

And so begins the adventures of the Colebrook twins ...

This was such a delightful read with charming characters that I found very easy to become attached to and a well-plotted storyline that I didn’t want to put down. The author does a great job of blending genres with a mix of historical fiction, romance, adventure, humour, and mystery, as well as highlighting some of the social issues of the time such as social classes and the treatment of women.

Alison Goodman creates a thorough and vibrant Regency setting, making great use of her PhD on the Regency era and historical fiction research.

Definitely a great read that I would recommend in 2024 or any year beyond.

KIRSTY: Oh, I am so glad you chose that book. It was on the shortlist for my favourite this year ­­­— so good. Do you hold, like me, the hope that there might be a sequel in the works?

ANITA: I’m waiting, yes.

Kirsty: —Yeah.

Anita: I feel like there has to be. You can’t create characters like that and leave them hanging—

KIRSTY: Yes, it’s very episodic and we’ve still got a few mysteries that haven’t quite been tied up at the end so I’ll be very interested to see if there’s a second book.

ANITA: Mmm.

KIRSTY: Now, our listeners might be able to keep an eye out for an upcoming event with Alison, is that right?

ANITA: Indeed, indeed. For our lucky local listeners, keep an eye out in a couple of months’ time that we might be able to hear a bit more from the author herself. So that’d be a real delight — looking forward to it. And maybe a bit more info on that potential sequel we’re hoping for.

KIRSTY: Exciting

ANITA: Well before I ask you about your favourite book, Kirsty do you have the title of the most borrowed crime book from 2023?

KIRSTY: Yes. Yes I do.

It’s Exiles by Jane Harper. Have you read it?

ANITA: Yes, I have. That was also one of my 2023 reads and it was on the list for potential favourite of the year because I do feel like that was a bit of a return to form for Jane Harper. It was one of my favourites from her since The Dry which was such a great read, so I can see why that was the most borrowed crime book because it was one of the top ones for me last year as well.

KIRSTY: Excellent.

ANITA: And you know who else has probably read it? Vivien. I know she’s an avid crime reader and she has another crime recommendation for us now.

VIVIEN: Hello everyone, my name is Vivien. I work with Wyndham Libraries.

One of my favourite series, has been for years, is the Strike series by Robert Galbraith —also known as J K Rowling if you didn’t know. Her new book came out in September last year, *The Running Grave*, and I’ve been a fan since the first book, *The Cuckoo’s Calling*. This book, the two main protagonists get involved in sects — s-e-c-t-s— and there is this ongoing will-they-won’t-they, and there is an amazing outcome to this book. It is so gripping, sometimes scary. It just grabbed me and held me right to the very end and I’m hallway through doing the second read. I highly recommend it and if you want to try it, if you can be bothered, start with number one and work your way through all the books, because they are all brilliant.

KIRSTY: Thanks Vivien.

Not all of our staff favourites are going to have such neatly correlating categories, so I’m going to swing wildly in the other direction now to share the library’s most borrowed romance of 2023.

*It Starts With Us* by Colleen Hoover

Interestingly this is the second book in the duology. The first book was just under it in popularity with the second most loans.

ANITA: Mmm, she is a very popular author, isn’t she? I think she appeared in a few places in our top tens across a number of categories. So, not surprised by that one myself.

KIRSTY: Definitely. I think you’ve got Vitina’s recommendation there from another popular author

ANITA: Yes, Vitina recommends *I Will Find You* by Harlan Coben

She says:

I decided to pick up my first Harlan Coben book and I couldn’t put it down!  What a ride of unexpected twists and turns. I loved Coben’s style of writing, the suspense, the action - there was no guessing the storyline.

The book grabs you from page one! It opens up with David Burroughs who is serving five years into a life sentence for the brutal murder of his three-year-old son Matthew.  Spoiler alert – his son may still be alive….

It's a super compelling action thriller which Vitina highly recommends!

Gripping, hard to put down and well written.

That said, that does sound like quite the read.

KIRSTY: Yeah, I’ve never read Harlan Coben either, but maybe now I will.

ANITA: Yeah, maybe

KIRSTY: Our next category of top loans is Fantasy —which you know I’m interested in— and the most borrowed book was *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* by Toshikazu Kawaguchi. This one is interesting to me, because I’ve seen it shelved in general fiction about half of the time, but it’s nice to see a translated title reach such popularity.

ANITA: Indeed. Our next staff recommendation is another of those books that could be shelved in a few places. Let’s hear from Emily now.

EMILY: My best read of 2023 was *Ithaca*, a mythological fantasy novel by Claire North. Ithaca takes place in Ancient Greece, in the time of the heroes, during the events of The Odyssey. This story focuses not on Odysseus, but his wife Penelope, the Queen of Ithaca, as she plays a dangerous waiting game during her husband’s long absence.

The story is narrated by the goddess Hera, who watches – and occasionally ever so slightly influences – the action taking place. Her narration is lyrical, sharp, and at times very funny in its brutal honesty. I loved this book – it started really well, became engrossing in the middle, and then was so good by the end that I had to slow down in the final chapters so that I could enjoy every last word before it was over.

The final climax was one of the most satisfying conclusions I have ever read. I love Greek mythology and novels such as Circe, but this was the first book I’ve read in that genre which focuses almost entirely on the female characters, which was intriguing and refreshing. I highly recommend Ithaca to readers of mythological fiction and fans of Greek mythology.

KIRSTY: Thanks Emily, great to have you back on the podcast for our final episode. I’ve been meaning to read one of these myth retellings that have come up in recent years but haven’t known where to start. Maybe this is the one.

Now, I’ve got a more traditionally fantasy recommendation here from Milena which I’m going to read out. Her best read of 2023 was:

*Babel, Or the Necessity of Violence: An Arcane History of the Oxford Translator’s Revolution* by R.F. Kuang

(if you’re searching for this in the catalogue, you can just enter Babel and R F Kuang)

Milena says:   
If you’re into dark academia fantasy, this should be on top of your list. It’s about language academics and polyglots whose paths and awakening found them going against the British Empire. Although there is a magic system involved, this book is a meticulously researched history and critique of empire, colonialism and racism.

It is also a love song to the diversity and beauty of language, the different ways we go through the world and how it is reflected in the language (or languages) that we dream in. But most of all, it is an ode to the imperfect art of translation, which is the defining theme of this novel: how an act of translation is an act of betrayal, but betrayal to whom?

The book is dense and steeped in history, but I found the plot and theme compelling. RF Kuang also did not shy away from making colonialism the central statement of the novel – and in that aspect alone provides an astounding storytelling value. It is my favourite book of the year.

ANITA: Wow, that sounds intense - what a lot of ground to cover. I have heard of that book but I hadn’t realised it dealt so much in translation because I think that is an interesting topic. And so I’m definitely compelled, after read— after hearing this review, to read that one. Another one from today’s podcast onto the to-read pile, thank-you.

KIRSTY: Yes, yes, same here. Although, I think I might give it a little space first because I’m currently in the midst of a dense novel also relating to libraries and language and things like that so maybe a little gap in between. Maybe that Harlan Coben or something—

ANITA: Something.

KIRSTY: —before *Babel.*

ANITA: Yes, a page-turning adventure. You’ll have to tell me about that book you’re currently reading. Perhaps after today’s podcast, I’m very curious.

But now it’s time for us to have a look at fantasy’s sister genre, science fiction, and Wyndham’s most borrowed science fiction title of 2023 was *Wrong place, Wrong time* by Gillian McAllister.

KIRSTY: Weirdly, this title wasn’t familiar to me at all until I looked at the cover. I’ve seen it more in general fiction/crime. But the idea of travelling further and further into the past each day to try and solve/prevent a crime is really interesting.

I’ve definitely heard of our next staff recommendation though and have been meaning to pick it up for a while now.

WREN: The best book I read this year was *Project Hail Mary* by Andy Weir, which I listened to as an audiobook on BorrowBox. When I looked this book up, because I’d seen so many amazing recommendations for it, it really didn’t seem like something I’d normally be drawn to. It’s science fiction, and seemed quite detailed in the science part, however the style of writing and the narrator of the audiobook made it really accessible and easy to follow.

It's about a middle-grade science teacher who inexplicably wakes up on a spaceship, on his own, only accompanied by two astronauts who have passed away, and he has no memory of why he is there. The story is fast-paced though, and you find out relatively quickly that he is on a mission to save planet Earth. It makes no sense why he would be there, out of everybody.

I won’t give you any spoilers, but don’t worry about this being a boring book about some guy floating around on spaceship by himself. There’s a lot more to it than that.

If you are in the market for an audiobook this is one of the best I have ever listened to. I tried to read the book, I found it a lot harder to follow though, and there are some aspects of the story that translate really beautifully into an audio setting.

I’d recommend giving it a go, even if you’re not typically into science fiction.

ANITA: Thanks, Wren.

Kirsty, I know you love science-fiction. Is your favourite from last year a space adventure?

KIRSTY: Actually, yes it is!

I went back and forth with choosing my favourite book of 2023 because there were so many good ones —I think you witnessed me debating— but I eventually settled on this title because it’s something I might not have found or even picked up if I hadn’t seen it while shelving – and I’m glad I did!

*The Scourge Between Stars* by Ness Brown is a spine-tingling space horror. The generation starship *Calipso* is limping its way back to Earth after a disastrous attempt at colonising a new planet decades before. They have lost contact with the rest of the fleet, and tensions between different sectors of the ship (farming, engineering etc) have reached an all-time high. Then there are the mysterious forces outside the ship that keep catching it in the crossfire as they fight against each other – too big and powerful to notice the humans that have wandering into their path.

With so much on her plate, acting Captain Jacklyn initially dismisses the knocking sounds in the walls to pipes settling, to stress, to her imagination. But then the bodies start showing up. Something is inside the ship with them – and it’s hungry.

The novella starts off with a slow creeping anxiety and the dread is ratcheted up bit by bit until it is at fever pitch and you’re just on the edge of your seat as the action really kicks off as Jacklyn and the security team try to eliminate the threat. Before the threat eliminates them!

Being a novella, this is the perfect size to read in one evening (or a morning if you’re chicken like me), but it packs in so much. The main threat, ship politics, Jacklyn’s relationships with her family and partner, conspiracy, the mystery outside the ship’s walls… and of course where would a space horror be without a robot or two?

I really enjoyed this one, and I think it’d be great for fans of sci-fi or horror – kind of reminds me of the movie Alien even though I haven’t watched that because, as I mentioned, I’m a scaredy cat. But it was an excellent surprise to me this year.

ANITA: Yeah, that does sound— I could really visualise that, I think. You know, your reference to Alien— I really did have those characters in my mind while you were describing it. You know and the fact that like, that is the story that we probably know a little from movies and other books and to hear that these authors handled it so well. And it's really hard to get a novella that covers everything from start to finish and does it well.

Sounds like a great read.

I won’t promise to add it to my list because that’s already getting long but it’s tempting. It’s tempting.

And now to move into a different genre entirely with our most borrowed non-fiction title of 2023, which is actually the same as it was in 2022 if you can remember that far back, Kirsty.

KIRSTY: Er…

ANITA: Not quite? Not quite?

Well let me remind you. It was *Atomic Habits* by James Clear

KIRSTY: Oh yes, that’s right. I guess we all still have habits we need to make, or break.

The most borrowed biography is a newer title though, and probably not much of a surprise.

Everyone wanted to read Spare by Prince Harry.

ANITA: Yes, that’s pretty expected. Out of curiosity, what’s the second most popular?

KIRSTY: *I’m glad my mom died* by Jennette McCurdy

ANITA: I’ve heard that’s funny, despite the subject matter.

KIRSTY: Yes, I think Wren recommended it for us last year?

ANITA: Ahead of the curve, Wren was, then.

Speaking of staff recommendations, our final staff favourite is from Kymberly. Let’s hear it now.

KYMBERLY: One of my favourite books of 2023 was The Last Devil to Die, which is the fourth instalment of the Thursday Murder Club series by Richard Osman. The Thursday Murder Club was initially published in 2020, and after reading the first book in the series I’ve read every one since. As an avid mystery genre reader, I loved the idea of a weekly club at a retirement home that meets to investigate unsolved murders, and Richard Osman does a magnificent job of creating such a diverse yet cohesive cast of characters (and characters of interest!). The fourth book in the series is yet another murder investigation with the usual plot twists and turns, but this time with a side of emotional devastation that I’m still finding difficult to get past three months later.

KIRSTY: Ooh, people keep telling me to read this series. You’ve read it Anita, haven’t you?

ANITA: I have, I have. And what a charming series it is, and it’s only getting better, I think. So I’m looking forward to reading the titles ahead, and if you haven’t read it already I’d recommend adding yet more titles to you reading list with those ones too.

KIRSTY: Ohh the list, it's out of control, but where would we be if we weren't adding more to it?

And that’s such great book to end our final episode on.

Thanks so much to everyone who sent in their favourite reads. And of course, thanks so much for listening these last through years, we’ve loved talking about books and hearing what you’ve been reading. Old episodes of the podcast will remain available for you to listen to on the website and you can keep an eye out for more staff recommendations in branch and online. We’re not going to stop reading, and we’re not going to stop telling you about it. Just somewhere else.

And of course, thank you to Anita for being my co-pilot on this final episode of the podcast. You’ve been great.

ANITA: My pleasure, as always. And an honour, really, as you say, it's been a real delight recording these for everyone and seeing my reading list grow each time that we have done an episode.

Thank you everyone.

KIRSTY: Farewell, and happy reading!