**Recently Returned**

**s03e04: Best of 2021**

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

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Kirsty: Hello, and welcome to Recently Returned. I’m one of your regular hosts, Kirsty, and I’m joined by fellow librarian, Johneen.

Johneen: Hello everyone.

Kirsty: Today we’re going to take a look back at some of the books we loved from last year. You’ll be hearing both of our favourite reads as well as what you borrowed the most last year. And we also asked some of our lovely co-workers to send in some reviews for us. So, we’ll finish off the episode with some of those. So, let’s get started and I’m going to put Johneen on the spot. What was your favourite read from 2021?

Johneen: My favourite read for 2021 was *We Were Not Men* by Campbell Mattinson. It’s set in Williamstown and Newport with really identifiable landmarks. It’s a story of two twin boys, John and Eden, who lose their parents in a car accident when they’re nine years old and they’re raised by their grandmother, Bobbie, who lives on a small property in Flowerdale. The story of the writing of this book is almost a story in itself. Mattinson started writing it 30 years ago, on the day he heard that someone important to him had died and with this information was this outpouring that was really personal and intense and raw. The person who died was a twin, and even though he’s not a twin himself, he and his brother were really, really close as children and they were also close in age. So, with this length of time that the book took to write, it inspired its own kind of late-night hopeless kind of hurt. So Mattinson talks about how in this book, there are many kinds of loss mixed into this story and that the best way to show loss and love for him was to write it in the first person because he felt that his re-telling of this story would be really honest and heart-felt.

 Interestingly enough, his son read the book and said to his dad, “It’s like a love letter to your brother,” and Mattison said, “Yeah, that’s really pretty true.” The aspect that really appeals to me about this book is the love which is so apparent right throughout the book. So even though it’s been called a ‘coming of age’ novel, perfect for readers of Trent Dalton’s, Boys Swallows Universe and Bridge of Clay by Markus Zusak. For me, it's the love that the boys have for each other, for their grandmother, for the places that they swim, for the farm and later on, for the challenge that love brings them. And I found this book really compelling, personal, honest and gripping. Mattinson is working on a new book and I’m hoping, my fingers are crossed, it’s not going to be another 30 years because, for me, [laughs] I absolutely agree that it’s a powerhouse of a novel about all the various faces that loves shows.

Kirsty: Wow. That really does sound powerful and this is a bit of a spoiler but just this morning we were talking about the new books club kits that our book clubs voted on and that’s one of the titles that was selected, and I think it’s going to be in high demand. It sounds gorgeous and like it would make me cry. So, I don’t know [laughs], should I have a box of tissues handy if I pick this one up?

Johneen: I think it is a really touching book and a lot of people have focused on the tragedy of the car accident but the story of these boys, for me, was so strong. That I actually felt really inspired and uplifted by their journey.

Kirsty: Oh lovely. It shows the perseverance of love.

Johneen: Yeah, and a bit like the perseverance of the human spirit. So, it came out at a time I think when we all needed to have a sense of connection with ourselves and our world and with the people around us. And like you, I’m really going to be interested to see what our book club readers think.

Kirsty: Yeah. Well, my favourite read from last year has some similarities but a very different tone. It’s a very cynical book. I loved it for that. So, my pick was *Magic for Liars* by Sarah Gailey which is a 2019 release. It’s kind of a perfect detective noir, modern fantasy fusion. It follows private investigator, Ivy Gamble. She’s hired to solve a murder in a secret magic school called Osthorne Academy for Young Mages. Magic is hidden and secret for most of the world but Ivy is hired because her sister has magic and Ivy will tell you throughout the book that she doesn’t care. That she’s never wanted magic. That she’s not envious of her sister. But her bitterness drips through every page of the book and it is fantastic. I can’t tell you how fun it was to read this cynical character who in true detective noir fashion, struggles with this self-destructive behaviour. It’s like watching a train wreck sometimes, you can’t look away but at the same time you just want to shake her and tell her to make better choices [laughs].

 I loved seeing the magic world from the perspective of an outsider and not only seeing that, seeing a magic school from the perspective of both an outsider and an adult. I loved the aspects of both genres as they combine. So instead of the mysterious femme fatale, we have Ivy’s estranged sister, Tabitha and the complex tangle of their family history.

I managed to put some pieces together as the case unfolded because it does have that really strong core of the plot but the last 50 pages had me on the edge of my seat and the end being – I can’t say anything but just prepare yourself. It just leaves you like hollow, the ending [laughs]. In a good way, in the best way, but yes, it’s great. Just read it, anyway. Yeah, that’s my pick.

Johneen: So, is Ivy the sort of detective who might work in the classic detective genre of the hard drinking, hard living, amazingly brilliant genius of a person who solves crimes but is their own worst enemy in terms of destroying themselves?

Kirsty: I was with you until you said, “absolutely brilliant.” [Laughs] Yes, yes to the hard drinking, hard living, cynical, keeping everyone at a distance, but she’s also fairly average. She wants more but circumstances, which I can’t explain, have trapped her in this mediocre kind of private investigator space and this is a chance for her to solve a big crime which she never would have been able to do, usually.

Johneen: And so, do you think that this will be the start of big things for Ivy?

Kirsty: I think that question is a spoiler. [laughs]

Johneen: OK.

Kirsty: I can’t answer it without giving a bit too much away about the ending.

Johneen: Because I was just wondering if this might be the start of a series about Ivy, the detective, in the world of magic.

Kirsty: I don’t think so. I think this is fairly solidly a stand-alone book and the authors’ other books have all been stand-alone, I think, as well? So, I hope everyone goes out and reads that and comes back and talks to me about it. And I’m going to now ask you, Johneen, to share with us what our borrowers read most in 2021?

Johneen: Well, quite rightly, we’ve started with our most popular crime title following your amazing story which I just want to read straightaway because I really love detectives and I really love magic. Our most popular crime title is *Half Moon Bay.* A novel by the well-known Jonathan Kellerman. Clay Edison, the protagonist has his hands full. He’s got a new baby who won’t sleep and he’s working the graveyard shift and he’s trying for once in his life to mind his own business but then comes the first call. Workers demolishing a local park have made a haunting discovery. The decades old skeleton of a child. Clay’s relentless search for answers will unearth a history of violence and secrets, revolution and betrayal. A must-read thriller.

Kirsty: That does sound interesting. What is our next genre?

Johneen: Our most popular fantasy title was the *Fellowship of the Ring*, being the first part of the Lord of the Rings Trilogy by J.R.R Tolkien. One ring to rule them all. One ring to find them. One ring to bring them all and in the darkness, bind them. This novel still thrills for lovers of middle earth.

Kirsty: That tagline, ‘the one ring’ it sends chills down your spine.

Johneen: Our top adult non-fiction was *Rich Dad, Poor Dad* with updates for today’s world and nine new study session sections by Robert T Kiyosaki. This title addresses the issues of a financial philosophy based on the principles that income generating assets always provide healthier financial outcomes. It challenges the notion that the poor and middle-class work for money but the rich have money work for them.

Our top adult fiction adds crime to romance. This is *The Guest List*, a novel by Lucy Foley. It’s a gripping twisty murder mystery thriller from the number one best-selling author of *The Hunting Party*. On an island off the coast of Ireland, the perfect wedding is taking place. Charming guests, a charming bride, a charming groom, all beautiful. It’s absolutely perfect. There’s just a little bit of a hitch. There’s an unexpected dead guest. Plus, we throw in a storm that traps a killer and the victims on the island for quite some time.

Kirsty: Mm-hmm. I’m hanging out to find what our readers favourite sci-fi book was the last year?

Johneen: Our favourite sci-fi title is *Jurassic Park*. A novel by Michael Crichton. First published in 1990, this is the classic thriller of science, [unintelligible 00:13:05] that took the world by storm. With this masterful cross of science fiction and action-adventure, Michael Crichton created one of the biggest best-sellers of all time. Turned by Steven Spielberg into the highest grossing blockbuster ever in 1993 when the first Jurassic Park hit our screens. Jeff Goldblum, Sam Neill and Laura Dern are re-united for the 2020 Jurassic Park Dominion. If you believe Sam, it’s a must-see film.

Kirsty: I will definitely going to be seeing that [laughs]. And if I’m not mistaken, we have one more category left?

Johneen: And finally, comes our most popular romance. It’s called *First Comes Scandal*, a Bridgerton’s prequel by Julia Quinn. She continues her delightful Bridgerton series presenting the latest love story between the Bridgerton and Rokesby families. Yes, there will be love but this time around, there’s quite a lot of scandal.

Kirsty: Do you watch the new TV series? I haven’t seen it personally.

Johneen: No, I haven’t.

Kirsty: I’ve heard it’s really good.

Johneen: All very handsome. It’s very Georgette Heyer, it looks like.

Kirsty: Yes, yes. Well, that was great. It’s always interesting to find out what our borrowers have been reading and it’s also interesting to find out what our colleagues have been reading. So, we asked our librarian council staff to send in their favourite reads from 2021 and we’ve got a series of recommendations for you. Some of which we will be reading out and some of which will be voice messages. I ask Johneen to start us off with our first one.

Johneen: Rochelle from Community Support was really kind in offering her favourite read. It’s also one of my favourite reads, so this one comes highly recommended. It’s *Boy Swallows Universe* by Trent Dalton. Rochelle says, “It was unlike any book I’ve read before. At first, I struggled to read it but once I got used to the style of writing, it quickly became one of the best books I’ve ever read. The style of storytelling where of a Universe was magical, full of originality and unexpected humour, joy and love. Combined with a cover bursting with colour, the characters came to life amongst family drama, poverty and violence. Yet, I loved every one of them. A must-read.” Troy, another member of the library team recommends *The Shadows of the Gods* by John Gwynne. Let’s have a listen to his recommendation.

Troy: Hi, Troy here. Probably my favourite read of 2021 was John Gwynne’s, *The Shadow of the Gods*. The first book in Gwynne’s new epic fantasy series, the Bloodsworn Saga. If you’re not familiar with Gwynne’s work, this is his third series and he will probably appeal to you if you’re a fan of Joe Abercrombie, George R.R. Martin or if you’re an old school fantasy fan of David Gemmell, like myself. Something which gripped me from the start was that this book is set in a world heavily influenced by Norse mythology, Scandinavian folk lore and even Viking history. It broke a lot of the classic medieval fantasy tropes which I’m very used to and it was pretty unforgiving with its use of Scandinavian terminology. Which forced me to find out about a whole heap of awesome historical monsters and beasts that I’d never even heard of before. It’s a grim tale about a mother who was a former warrior, a woman who’s striving to prove her worth in a warband and a former slave seeking vengeance. It’s told in a cold and brutal landscape but I really can’t wait to read the next one when it comes out this year.

Johneen: I love getting a new perspective on that part of the world and that time of history.

Kirsty: Yeah, it sounds like a really interesting one. I’m going to continue with reading out a recommendation from Sandra. So, Sandra recently finished *White Hot Kiss* by Jennifer L. Armentrout. She says, “When I first started reading, I thought it was just another YA romance with a love triangle between an awkward girl and two super-hot guys which it was, but one of the guy’s a demon. The other is a gargoyle and there is danger brewing in the world as more nasty demons are leaving hell to come top side. One race is good, one is bad but not everything is black and white.

Johneen: It’s already raising the stakes by having a handsome gargoyle which goes a bit against type.

Kirsty: Yes [laughs]. I’m just going to play for us another voice message.

Vivien: Hi, everyone. This Vivien here from Point Cook Library. Hope you’re all well and safe. This is my little report. I am a murder reader. I read murders of every kind, mostly English I must admit and sometimes I really want to change. So, I was looking around the library one day and I found a book by Jane Johnson called *The Sea Gate*. Couldn’t be less like a murder, although ̶ no I’m not giving you any clues. Anyway, so this was a wonderfully written book, in my opinion. It was sort of romance – blegh and it was sort of murder ̶ ooh, and it was just a really, really good story. I highly recommend it. It held me from the beginning right through to the end and that’s saying something. Thanks for listening. Bye-bye.

Johneen: I’m really tempted to find out what happens in this book.

Kirsty: It’s such a mysterious recommendation. I love it. You get the feel of it without really knowing what you’re getting into.

Johneen: And she’s certainly teasing us all the way along.

Kirsty: Yes [laughs]. Do you have our next recommendation?

Johneen: Yes. Emily shares her favourite read for 2021. It’s The Murderbot Diaries, a series by Martha Wells. Emily says, that, “All the Murderbot Diaries are fantastic and the newest one, *Network Effect* just won a Hugo award for best sci-fi novel and the series won, as a series. Please,” she says, “Read all the Murderbot books. The library has most of them in print or in e-book and e-audio.” And then Emily invites you to come and talk to her about the way all the characters use name and how the bots name themselves and only some people are allowed to use their names. After reading the second one again, after reading the most recently, Emma went, “What? Was the author planning that five years ago?” Read and see she suggests and then come along and talk to Emily.

Kirsty: I will definitely be talking to Emily. This series has been on my to-read list for quite some time and, in fact, Emily has recommended it to me before as well but when she sent this recommendation through and I saw that it was in e-audio, it jumped straight up my list and I downloaded the first one and listened to it in the car on the way home and it is fantastic. And if you’re an audio listener, the narrator for this series is just so dead pan. It adds this extra level of humour and sarcasm to the book. It’s great.

Johneen: Seems to be Murderbot is one of those that really takes you on a journey?

Kirsty: Yeah. I will continue our recommendations with one from Carrie who recommends *Cinderella is Dead* by Kalynn Bayron. Carrie says, “Queer black girls team up to overthrow the patriarchy in the former kingdom of Cinderella in this unique and powerful re-telling. This fresh take on a classic story will make you question the tales you’ve been told and root for the girls to break down the constructs of the world around them. I’ve been looking forward to reading this one because the premise is really good. When I started reading it, I was instantly in awe. The writing was piercing, the word ‘sharp like a needle’ and I loved how the first chapter built this cruel patriarchal world in which it was impossible for a young queer woman to strive for a life without fear.”

Johneen: It’s a beautiful use of the word ‘Cinderella’ to set up a world that’s cruel and patriarchal. It takes our notion of Cinderella, stripping it back like the Grimm brothers presented those raw stories that we prettied up over time to make them sweet when the thrust of them was anything but. And also, it’s great to have that diversity in books, more and more. I read an article in the Guardian and it talked about how the person writing the article said they stopped reading because they couldn’t find people like themselves in any of the books that they came across. And so, I just think it’s really necessary that we are now writing books for more and more people to feel comfortable and to relate to.

Kirsty: I nodded. You can’t see that at home.

Johneen: I can – oh they can’t see it [laughs].

Kirsty: This has been on my to-read list for a while as well and, initially, we didn’t have it in the library collection. So, I’m really excited to see that we now have copies that I can go and reserve it and you can go reserve it and, hopefully, we don’t all reserve it at the same time but we have another recording. So, there’ll be something for us to read while we wait. I’ll just queue that up now [laughs].

Josh: Hi, I’m Josh, recommending *Shards of Earth*. It’s the first in the series called the Final Architecture written by Adrian Tchaikovsky who also wrote *Children of Time* which is another amazing book. *The Shards of Earth* is a great sci-fi space opera that follows Idris and his crew in a time after earth has been destroyed by a mysterious race. Although it is the opener of a series. It’s still a complete book, so if you hate cliff-hangers like I do, you’re in luck with this one. It’s worldbuilding and characterisation had me listening to every word and now that I’m finished, I can’t wait for the sequel *Eyes of the Void*, hopefully, coming out on the 20th of April.

Kirsty: Thank you for letting us know that we don’t have to worry about cliff-hangers Josh. Much appreciated [laughs].

Johneen: It’s so exciting finding out all the different books that people read and that they all are so engaging and I just want to pick them up and read them now.

Kirsty: I know. This podcast has my to-read list out of control [laughs]. As we continue, with adding more books to my list, do you have our next recommendation?

Johneen: Our next recommendation is by Dayle and the title recommended is You Need To Know by Nicola Moriarty. This book follows a family from Sydney who have been involved in a car accident and it looks at the events building up to the accident and the consequences following. This domestic Australian drama will have you enthralled and desperate to find out what happens next.

Kirsty: Another mysterious recommendation. Thanks Dayle. I know a lot of people are going to be interested in that one. And Johneen, you’ve got our next one?

Johneen: Anita is also giving us a recommendation.

Anita: Hello. My name’s Anita and my favourite 2021 read is *The Good Sister* by Sally Hepworth. The book is set in Melbourne and is about twin sisters: Fern and Rose. Fern works in a library, a familiar setting for me, obviously, and for you too, listeners, I’m sure. And Rose is an interior designer. The two couldn’t be more different but they are still extremely close and Fern relies on Rose to survive. Rose was always Fern’s protector from a very young and that has carried on into adulthood. The two are so close that Rose asks Fern for her help when she’s having trouble falling pregnant. Fern is keen to pay her sister back for the help she’s given her over the years. All she needs to do is to find a father. Seems simple right? The book is told from the perspective of both sisters and is part thriller, part romance, part family drama. I found it a really enjoying and compelling read and it stood out for me in 2021.

Kirsty: Thanks Anita.

Johneen: It reminds me a little bit of the book the *Sisters of Spicefield* where two sisters who are very close help each other for one of the sisters to have a child and the consequences of that decision.

Kirsty: You’ll have to read it and have a discussion with Anita about the similarities and differences ̶

Johneen: Yeah.

Kirsty: ̶ between the two books. And that brings us to our very last staff recommendation. So, this is Wren’s favourite read from 2021.

Wren: Hello, friends. This is Wren from the Point Cook Library. The best book I read in 2021 was called *The House in the Cerulean Sea* by TJ Klune. I read this book after two colleagues at the library told me that it had made them cry happy tears which was exactly what I felt like after last year. It’s about loneliness, a highly strung, lonely man who lives in a world very similar to ours. The one key difference is that it contains a marginalised community of magical people. He works as a social worker who inspects state-run orphanages for magical children to ensure the kids living there are being treated well. The story follows him as he undergoes a top-secret assignment of inspecting an orphanage housing six children who are considered particularly dangerous. This book is a lovely gentle joyful book about love, friendship and found family. It covers themes of discrimination, courage and community and it includes a charming LGBTQ romance. It is an adult book but I think it does border on YA sometimes. It’s very sweet. The writing isn’t very complicated. You don’t have to think too hard when you’re reading it. It’s really just a pleasure to read and it was exactly the kind of book that I needed and that [laughs] I think we all need after two years after living through a global pandemic. It’s just charming, is the best way that I can describe it. I highly recommend. Five stars.

Kirsty: I agree. This was a great book. It was in my top five from last year as well and it’s everything Wren was saying and more. I loved that slow realisation one has had that they system he’s working within is broken.

Johneen: A dear friend has read it and ever since they talked about their experience in reading it. Whenever I see this title; I remember what they say and how touched they were and the extraordinary impact it had. I can remember the day they read it because they read it over two days but I remember the day that she finally finished it and I can remember all those things because it was such an important read for this person. So, I think it’s one of those special books for 2021.

Kirsty: Yeah, it’s fantastic and it just builds so slowly and by the end, you’re in love, but then it’s over. You’re left – your heart is light and what a beautiful book to end this episode on, really. So, thank you so much Johneen for joining me on this reading journey and thanks for listening at home. You can view the top ten borrowing list on the website along with the episode booklist and transcript. We’d love to know what you’ve been reading? Did you have a favourite from 2021? Drop us a line at recentlyreturned@wyndham.vic.gov.au with your comments. We’d love to hear from you. Thanks so much and as always, happy reading.

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