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**Summer Series: Wren**

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Kirsty: Hello and welcome to Recently Returned. I’m one of your hosts, Kirsty, and I’m joined today by Wren, one of our library and programme support officers for our final Summer Series episode of the season. Don’t worry, we’re planning on a Best of 2022 episode as well, so there’ll be more podcast goodness coming your way later. Hi Wren, how are you?

Wren: Hi Kirsty, I am great thank you. I’m excited to talk about books with you today.

Kirsty: Excellent, I’m very excited to hear what you have to say. So as with all of our other episodes, we’re going to start off with a couple of rapid-fire questions to get know you before we hear about your summer reading recommendation. Are you ready?

Wren: Yeah, I am.

Kirsty: Alright. So, what is your worst reading habit?

Wren: Well, this one is a controversial one for a librarian, but I am very, very rough with my books. I obviously respect library books and other people’s books as they lend them to me. But with my own books, from my own collection, I am very blasé about keeping them tidy. I break their spines. I read them in the bath. They’re always covered in food and coffee spills. I dog-ear the pages. I’ve had a few fellow librarians look at me like I’m a monster when I admit to this kind of behaviour.

Kirsty: I am glad you prefaced it by saying that it was just your own books.

Wren: Yeah. I actually, I used to read library books in the bath until I started working at a library and I got told, “Did you know that a water-damaged book can destroy a shelf of library books.”

Kirsty: Yeah.

Wren: Mould in them. So, I learned my lesson quickly that you’ve got to be very, very, very careful with water damage on books. So, I’m good now. I’m better now.

Kirsty: It is a bit of a shock when you first learn that though. Well, I’ve got our second question here: which book do you wish you could experience again for the first time?

Wren: This one I thought long and hard about because there’s so many. But really, I think the one that affected me the most the first time I read it, was The Book Thief by Marcus Zusak. Just the emotional impact that book had on me when I read it for the first time, I don’t think I’ve ever had that. Did you find that same impact?

Kirsty: I think this would have been my pick as well. I’ve not reread it since because it so deeply affected me. I was ugly crying on the train. But I’m nervous that it wouldn’t have the same impact if I read it again.

Wren: I have reread it since and it definitely didn’t have that same impact. , I guess I mean no spoilers, but I guess set during the Holocaust there’s a lot of horrors that are written about in that story. Knowing how a story ends doesn’t necessarily ruin it for you, but for that book it was just that the impact of some of those storylines was not quite the same the second read through. Still beautiful, still impactful. That first time through. Wow.

Kirsty: Yeah. What a great pick.

Wren: Thank you.

Kirsty: On the back of that one. What is the most challenging book you’ve read this year?

Wren: I read I’m Glad my Mum Died by Jennette McCurdy recently which is a memoir written by Jennette McCurdy. She’s an actress. She played Sam on iCarly which is a well-known Nickelodeon show. And it’s about her experience as a child actor and her relationship with her mother, which as you can imagine with the title, was fraught. And about her coming to terms with the fact that her relationship with her mum was abusive. It was, yeah, challenging is a good word for it. It was very confronting.

Kirsty: Yeah, it sounds very heavy.

Wren: Mm. It was. It was. It was very interesting in that there was no real relief. I think with a lot of memoirs that are heavy, they often write them with a bit of a humorous brush as well to make it a bit easier to read. But I did not find that with this one.

Kirsty: Would you suggest it then for people who are enmeshed in their own difficult family situation?

Wren: I think with this book what you’d want to do is educate yourself on the content and be mindful of your own triggers and so long as you don’t go in blind, I think it could be very helpful. I’ve read a lot of reviews by people who have similar experiences to Jennette McCurdy saying that it was helpful for them.

Kirsty: Oh, that’s really good to know. I’m always telling people as well, there’s nothing wrong with putting a book down.

Wren: Mm-hmm.

Kirsty: So that was our final rapid-fire question. So now we’re going to get into your summer reading recommendation.

Wren: OK. So, my summer reading recommendation is called Aue by Becky Manawatu. I don’t know if you’ve picked up on it, but I am a Kiwi and this one is written by a New Zealand author. It’s set in both the north and south island of New Zealand in the 1990s. It’s very reminiscent of Once Were Warriors by Alan Duff and The Bone People written by Keri Hulme. Both are New Zealand classics and Aue has very similar themes to both of them. New Zealand has, as everyone knows, a good reputation for being a stunning, gorgeous, beautiful, peaceful country.

But, I think there’s a very different reality to living in New Zealand and visiting New Zealand on a holiday. And I think these novels highlight some of those social issues that make New Zealand quite a challenging place to grow up for a lot of people. Obviously, not everybody, but there’s a lot of underlying social problems and issues that a lot of people deal with in New Zealand. So, these are some of the themes that are woven through Aue. It is about a young man called Taukiri and his little brother Arama. Their parents pass away and Taukiri takes Arama down to the south island to live with his aunt and uncle and then Taukiri leaves Arama and goes to Wellington. Then it also has the perspective of their mother as a young woman as well.

So, it’s the parallel storylines of Taukiri in the 1990s and then his mother as a young woman as well; and how they got to the point where the mother had passed away and Taukiri had left his little brother behind. I won’t get into too much of the storyline. But I think there’s a core themes are around the decisions that we make and the decisions that were made for us and how they then can impact our lives and then the choices that we have to make. So Taukiri is not happy about the fact that he has to leave Arama behind, but he feels the need to go off and sort of discover who he is as a young man and what the world holds for him.

Arama is left behind by his parents who have both passed away and then also by his older brother, so he feels very abandoned. But he forms this very strong friendship with a little girl who lives nearby and it’s about how that friendship helps him get through some of those difficult things that are happening to him. I really loved it because it is so beautifully written, and it is easy to read. As a Kiwi, I also really loved reading about New Zealand. I get very homesick so reading just about the cultural references and the slang and the language that’s used and the food they’re eating and the places they’re going are all things that are familiar with me. I really enjoyed that.

I really enjoyed the way that Becky Manawatu managed to write about these very dark realities while also weaving through these themes of friendship and love which is a really beautiful thing. While it’s certainly not a feel-good book, it definitely has some friendships and relationships that are very beautiful and touching to read about. It’s not a light, fun, sugary summer read, and I know lots of people look for that while they’re looking for their summer reading lists. But I really loved it and thought it was very impactful and worth the read.

Kirsty: No, don’t be worried about that at all. Everyone’s got different reading tastes and we’ve got quite a wide range of books in the summer series. No spoilers here but we’ve run the real gamut so far. So, this sounds like a lovely addition to the recommendations we’ve got for people.

Wren: I would say anyone who is not a Kiwi, who is picking it up and may not know that a lot of us have very basic today Māori language. Words we learn at school. Don’t be intimidated by that, they’re sort of sprinkled through. Just get your phone out and give them a quick Google if you don’t know what a word means. I think that also adds to the beauty of the book.

Kirsty: Oh excellent. I was going to ask when you mentioned the slang and the cultural references, how accessible it was. But a lot of authors who include either their native language or languages around where they live, often it’s very evident what’s being spoken about by context.

Wren: Yes, absolutely. I think it’s well done in this one. In Aue.

Kirsty: Great, thanks so much, Wren. That’s a great recommendation and I’m sure people at home will love it. If you’ve read this book and want to let us know or if you’ve got any comments, you can drop us a line via the Library Facebook page at Libraries in Wyndham or shoot us an email at recentlyreturned@wyndham.vic.gov.au. We’d love to hear from you. Now this was our final episode of the Summer Series but as I mentioned at the top of the episode, we’re going to have a Best of 2022 episode. We’d love to hear what your favourite book from 2022 was as well. So, send them through and hopefully we can include you in the episode. Thank you for joining us. Thanks again Wren. And happy reading everyone.

Wren: Bye.

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