

The Hidden Bookcase Transcript
Our Wives Under the Sea by Julia Armfield

Morgan

Welcome to The Hidden Bookcase: come through and get cosy. Pick a book, your favourite book, that's the one that opens this room. Inside you'll find a warm fire, a loving cat, and a wide skylight to the stars

Sorren

And a dangerously high to be read pile.

Morgan

I'm Morgan, I use they/them pronouns and I am a glass full of salt water as an act of love.

Sorren

I'm Sorren, I use he/him pronouns and I am a statue of St. Brendan at the foot of your bed.

Morgan

We've been friends for over a decade and are always swapping books.

Sorren

Each fortnight we take it in turns to recommend one another a favourite read. The first-time reader tells us what they know about the book, makes some predictions about what they don't, and then we discuss our thoughts with all of you bookworms. On our shelf this month are some waterlogged books.

Morgan

So today, let's get to talking about...

Sorren

Our Wives Under the Sea by Julia Armfield.

[THEME MUSIC FADES OUT.]

Sorren

So Morgan, you're kicking us off for moist month..

Morgan

(Laughs)

Sorren

(Laughing) With Our Wives Under the Sea.

Morgan

Yes. I am.

Sorren

So, how did you come across it?

Morgan

So I believe the first time I heard about it was from someone on TikTok. I think it was @li.reading. Their review started with "If my wife ever says she's going on a deep sea expedition, I'm running away," or something like that. And I was like, "That sounds interesting." And then I saw it in my local Waterstones. And it has such a pretty cover. And I was like, "I want to buy a book for serotonin. And I've heard of this book, and @li.reading liked it. And it's got lesbians. So I'll buy it."

Sorren

What more do you need?

Morgan

Exactly. And then I think I read it for the first time at the Edinburgh Fringe. So I was already completely unhinged that week because I had barely slept. So I read this book. (Laughing) And it became my entire personality for the whole week. My friend Jithya was like, "What is going on?" And I was like, "Listen, the lesbians are experiencing sea horror!" So that was how I read this book.

Sorren

That's an experience.

Morgan

It was a good way to read it. I think

Sorren

I read a lot of this after midnight in the bath...

Morgan
(Laughs)

Sorren
Which I also think was probably appropriate. Over multiple days!

Morgan
Of all the places to choose to read this book... You pick the bath?

Sorren
(Laughs) Yes! I was enjoying myself.

Morgan
I mean, good for you.

Sorren
Thank you.

Morgan
I love this.

Sorren
Method acting? I don't think that's what it is.

Morgan
You're getting into the mind of the character.

Sorren
Exactly.

Morgan
I love this. We'll call it method reading.

Sorren
Method reading. If you're not crossing the desert when you read Dune, then you're not doing it correctly. I'm sorry.

Morgan
If you're not in the middle of Hollywood, when you read Evelyn Hugo, what's the point?

Sorren

What's the point? And you have to have time and travel back to the 50s or else there is, again, no point.

Morgan

Yeah.

Sorren

Yeah. You're just not a real reader, if you don't. I'm sorry.

Morgan

Yeah, come on. You heard it here first folks.

Sorren

(Laughing) Anyway! What is Our Wives Under the Sea about, Morgan?

Morgan

Our Wives Under the Sea is about a married lesbian couple, one of whom is a deep sea explorer. One day, the deep sea explorer goes missing whilst on a dive, for five months, and when she comes back, she's a little bit... Different than she used to be. And it's all about the... [CENSORED] up if true. What if your wife just dissolves in the bath?

Sorren

Would you still love me if I dissolved in the bath?

Morgan

(Laughs)

Sorren

A very important question, which I think should become the next TikTok trend.

Morgan

The horrors are incomprehensible? Not to me. To me, they're my wife. That's what this is about.

Sorren

Shall we see what I thought it was about?

[TAPE RECORDER CLICKS ON.]

Sorren

So I do not know a lot about Our Wives Under the Sea. I know that Armfield is a poet and apparently that poetic sensibility is reflected in the prose of Our Wives Under the Sea. I know it's sapphic, I think that maybe there's something about the protagonist is... From her point of view, her wife or girlfriend went out to the water and then came back differently. I don't know if she was a sailor or in a submarine or something, I might be conflating that with a completely different story. But that's what's on my mind going in... Cover gives very little away, it's just sort of a woman whose face has been obscured by these droplets. But that does kind of make me lean into something about identity, and how that can be changed. I'm expecting horror. I know this is horror, so possibly a sort of cosmic horror thing, more existential than necessarily just gore. The horrors of the vastness of the ocean rather than the horrors of a particular sea monster or something is kind of more what I'm leaning towards now. And I'm very excited to get into it. Do I have any wild predictions? Maybe there's multiple copies of the wife, you know, it is obviously going to be a wife, not a girlfriend because it's called Our Wives Under the Sea. Well done, Sorren. So. (Laughs) I'm assuming that when her wife returns, maybe she tries to track down her original wife, and she discovers that there's a whole bunch of copies and she can't find the original. That's my wild prediction sort of [a] changeling thing going on there. Okay.

[TAPE RECORDER CLICKS OFF.]

Morgan

Well, first off, having advertised this a lot as "Oh my god, Julia Armfield is a poet and it-" I don't actually think she is a poet.

Sorren

Oh!

Morgan

I think that has been false advertising on my part, because I've now read her other book as well. And I'm like, I think it's just her short storiness, and her vibes and her style of writing specifically, but it feels like poet writing. So that was my fault.

Sorren

No, no worries. I think we did say that in.... In the Watchful City. So, retraction. But it does have a sort of a poetic feel to it.

Morgan

Other things in your review.

Sorren

Submarine, not a sailor. Existential horror. I think it was an interesting combination of claustrophobia and existential horror, which I really enjoyed.

Morgan

I think it's that specific style of horror. That's more metaphor. On the one hand, something is very clearly happening that is about the sea. But on the other hand, the horror is very clearly a metaphor for other psychological things.

Sorren

It didn't necessarily feel like it was an allegory for something specific, which I enjoyed. I think that can work in horror. But I think when that's done really heavy handedly, it can get quite irritating. So I liked that this is open to interpretation in lots of ways. And there were lots of things in Miri's life that you could draw parallels to like her losing her mother, like her own health... Losing someone to actual death or to trauma. The cover- she's not really obscured by droplets. I think she's actually just melting. (Laughs) I think I misinterpreted that...

Morgan

I feel like it could be in a mirror or something like that, because some of the droplets look more like fingerprints, like she's tried to sort of get herself back then she's also clearly praying on the cover.

Sorren

Oh, I completely missed that. So maybe it's Jelka on the cover.

Morgan

Miri is Catholic- brackets, lapsed.

Sorren

That's a good point.

Morgan

I just love this cover so much, like the green and the vibes... If you look at the US cover, I'm sorry, but the US cover is horrible. It's pink? It looks like a desert.

Sorren

Yeah, I'm usually pro not having people on covers. But I think in this case, because you don't directly see her face... I think it tells you a lot more about what the book is about. The US cover really could be anything even genre wise, it could be anything. It just feels very generic in comparison.

Morgan

I genuinely thought it was the desert. This was up for Goodreads awards last year and I genuinely didn't even notice because they had the US cover up there. And I just didn't recognise that they were the same book.

Sorren

Yeah, even the texture of the waves seems kind of wrong to me.

Morgan

Too pointy.

Sorren

So Morgan, you mentioned that you also read Salt Slow?

Morgan

I'm not a short story person, usually... I loved this book. [We'll] talk about Our Wives in a second. But I loved Salt Slow so much. You've got a short story about a city where all of the people's sleeps become real and apart from themselves and so they all can't sleep anymore.

Sorren

Ooh!

Morgan

And they all start going slightly insane. You've got a story about a girl who's raised alongside a wolf. You've got a story about a all-girl band that makes all women who listen to them go insane and start killing men. Basically.

Sorren

It's like a lesbian, um... Grifter's Bone!

Morgan

Yeah, like lesbian Grifter's Bone! There was a lot of parallels: there's a story about a woman whose girlfriend comes back from the dead, and is just hanging around rotting in her house.

Sorren

Mm.

Morgan

And she's like, "I don't know how to deal with this," and it's like (Laughing) "Interesting! Interesting..."

Sorren

I did get the sense reading this, that it's somebody who really enjoys the came back wrong trope, which I really appreciated. Thinking about it, I feel like usually when I come upon it, it's an element of a larger fantasy story.

Morgan

Yeah.

Sorren

And to sort of sit with it for so long. and examine it in such detail was really nice, because it is a trope that I love.

Morgan

The last story in Salt Slow is actually called Salt Slow and it's about a drowned world, and a married couple who are stuck on a boat, and the woman is pregnant, which gives birth to a sea horror, which her husband casts overboard, and then it comes back and drowns the husband.

Sorren

Sounds deserved. Why would you throw your little sea monster out of the boat? How could you do this?

Morgan

The first story is about a girl, her skin starts peeling off and she becomes a praying mantis. And she kills a boy at a party. You can go straight from

Salt Slow to Our Wives in the creative process. They make so much sense.

Sorren

Salt Slow came out first, didn't it?

Morgan

Yes, yeah.

Sorren

That's interesting. It feels like maybe, Our Wives is like a distillation of the ideas that were being explored there. Just from what you're saying. Obviously, I haven't read it.

Morgan

It was really interesting having read Our Wives to then read Salt Slow 'cause the interconnectedness was very vibey. But Our Wives...

Sorren

Our Wives.

Morgan

My beloved.

Sorren

The writing style.

Morgan

Writing style.

Sorren

It was very good. I really liked it- Hang on, I have things I know that we don't usually like, pull out quotes. But I feel like there was one early on that made me go "Yeah, I'm vibing with this." The offhanded description of "The look of a person who has let their gaze drop too deep and now can't seem to retrieve it." I really liked that- that little metaphor of it being a physically dropped item. I love that I think that fit the allegorical tone of the novel very nicely. And there was also a line early on, before Lea leaves: "Her dress was white and clung to her like sealskin." Loving the little mythology reference there, despite the fact that there's not

outright references. I feel like you can feel the foundations of that behind this.

Morgan

Mm. Definitely the way that she writes, when like, she does dashes and stuff like that and descriptions when she doesn't use the definite article: "Unstill is the word Lea uses, tilting her head to the side, as if an answer to some sound though the evening is quiet. Dry hum of the road outside the window." Just going straight into the description- I think that's what made me think that she was a poet because that is a very sort of like, poet way of writing because you don't have the space for those extra words.

Sorren

It feels very visceral, you're just sort of there. It is kind of like if you were describing a memory and just verbatim saying whatever came into your head about a particular memory. Feels very immediate.

Morgan

It feels very dreamlike in a way that I'm a big fan of. I'm a big fan, if you didn't know, of dreamlike writing. (Laughs)

Sorren

I think it works really well here like, the disconnected scenes because there's clearly a dissociation of sorts going on for both characters. So having things feel slightly unreal circles right back around into making them feel more convincing, because you would be kind of losing your mind a little bit in this situation.

Morgan

Just the first line: The deep sea is a haunted house, a place in which things that ought not to exist move about in the darkness," Just sets it up so well.

Sorren

That caught me completely. As soon as I read that I was like, I am pretty confident that I'm gonna like this a lot.

Morgan

The way she brings so many different things in... I'm pretty sure that Julia Armfield must have been brought up Catholic because it's also a

very, very big part of Salt Slow, and a lot of the characters are lapsed Catholic or go to Catholic school. So I feel like her Catholic upbringing and also existing as a queer woman in public, it comes across in here quite a lot with like, the little things like her, introducing Leah as her girlfriend as her wife, because it makes people back off more.

Sorren

Yeah, just the way that their dynamic gets sort of read differently, everything they ever explicitly say how Miri and Leah present, and how that chafes with the expectations that are necessarily placed upon them, but they have a very believable relationship. It's neither stereotypical or just deliberately the opposite of the stereotypes to try to make a point, they just feel like a real couple who sometimes do fall into a stereotype and sometimes don't. They were just very convincing as characters.

Morgan

Her casual characterization is so good. There's a lot of side characters who feel like real people throughout the book. Incredible thing to be able to achieve.

Sorren

Yeah, everyone feels incredibly rounded. And I was also impressed that we don't actually really get any real flashback scenes of Miri and Leah interacting, we get them remembering moments with each other both Leah on the submarine and then Miri. She doesn't actually just take us back very often- If at all, actually, I think there are scenes that run longer, but they're still, usually Miri, just recalling an event, filtered through her narrative voice, but you still get a very clear picture of what their relationship looked like. And I think an investment in them. Little details, like Leah being like, "When I was sad, Miri would cycle my feet on the sofa and shout Tour de France repeatedly until I laugh."

Morgan

(Laughs)

Sorren

Very convincing couple ridiculous inside joke that is really endearing.

Morgan

They're so cute!

Sorren

It's in all of those little details.

Morgan

Can we talk about the absolute tragedy that Leah's whole thing is like, "I'm collecting all these different facts so that I can report them back to Miri." And then Miri's like, "Oh, yeah, she's clearly in her own world, she's not talking to me when she has these like, infodump sessions." And it's like, no, that is Leah, trying to communicate with you now. She's saved up all these little fights to give to you. And this is the only way she knows how to communicate now. And this is her way of trying to share love. And you just... You can't understand that because she came back wrong. And oh my god, that absolutely bodied me the first time I realised it.

Sorren

It's so good. The whole concept of love being the person that you want to tell things to... There's a letter, I forget who it's by, but it was a real letter exchanged between a couple, one of them was incarcerated. [I] found it in the... The Letters of Note collection on love by Sean Usher, which is a very interesting little series if you want to read some epistolary nonfiction, but there was a line in there along the lines of, "Now I do not even look at the sky. If I see a cloud, who can I tell?" That thing of just, love being communicating, and seeing something and thinking "Oh, I'm going to tell them about this later." And then that being broken, and that being sort of the beginning of grief is not being able to communicate with somebody. I love that idea. And I think it was explored so well here,

Morgan

Who was your favourite character?

Sorren

That's a really good question. I'm not sure I don't have like, an immediate instinct. I really liked both the leads, but I did like Miri a lot, because I feel like she could easily have been flat because she is sort of the anchor, the point of view character... I mean, obviously Leah also gets her point of view, but [Miri's] the audience surrogate in some ways, because she doesn't know what's going on. She feels very three dimensional and compelling in a way that I'm kind of struggling to articulate. And I liked the convincing progression of her from, "I should probably call the doctor," to sliding glasses of saltwater to Leah because she realises that they are helping her.

Morgan

The scene where she gets into the bath with her or when she brings the TV into the bathroom so they can watch TV together.

Sorren

Yeah.

Morgan

Oh my god. The implication that all of the bits that we get from Leah, are bits that she's written down that Miri will read after..

Sorren

Mm, mm-hm.

Morgan

Because Jelka's sister brought it.

Sorren

Yeah.

Morgan

Many feelings, much ouch.

Sorren

Do you have a favourite?

Morgan

I think it was Miri. I think she's just so relatable to that sort of millennial/Gen Z days starting to elide, not sure why you're doing things, feeling like you're asleep half the time... Also as a hypochondriac, I feel that mood a lot. That realisation she had, she always assumed something bad would happen to her. She never really realised that bad things could happen to other people as well. And that they would affect other people just as much as her.

Sorren

I do love the misery of that trope, or when it's vice versa and someone's protecting somebody else and then something bad happens to them.

Morgan

Yeah, I just really liked her as a narrator.

Sorren

Mm.

Morgan

I thought she had such a strong voice.

Sorren

I think if you've ever watched anyone struggling with a physical illness, a mental illness, any kind of deterioration that feels so cosmic and impossible to undo, it's very relatable. And then in the acknowledgment, Armfield talked about writing I think during the pandemic? I don't think she specifically said writing during the pandemic but she dedicated to someone and said, "The only person that I could be trapped with and still want to continue being with them." And I think there was that kind of claustrophobia in Miri... I don't know why this happened, but I kept imagining the apartment that I was in during the pandemic. You get the like, a very literal claustrophobia from Leah's point of view, because she's stuck in a submarine. But then Miri very, very rarely leaves the apartment which starts with the the claustrophobia of the whole apartment, because often Leah's in the living room or in the kitchen, and then it shrinks and becomes sort of just the bedroom and the bathroom. And then just the bathroom where she's just sitting on the floor. It was that shrinking feeling that I think a lot of people can sadly relate to now.

Morgan

Mm. Yeah. I do like, sort of... Closed stage, I think I'd call it, narratives. Where you're stuck in these very small spaces. You have to be quite creative in your description, and dynamics in order to keep the reader engaged.

Sorren

Yeah.

Morgan

But it makes for such an interesting story when people get it right. I could imagine the submarine so clearly...

Sorren

Mm.

Morgan

The metal and the warmth, and the denseness and the muffled quiet. I could picture it so clearly when I was reading. Poor Jelka, though.

Sorren

Yeah.

Morgan

My girl did not deserve any of that.

Sorren

No.

Morgan

She's just trying to get everybody to listen to the ghosts.

Sorren

Exactly.

Morgan

I did spend half this book when I first listened to it being like, "I've listened to a Magnus Archives episode like this!"

Sorren

You know, what it really reminded me of actually was Wolf 359, weirdly. I think it was the claustrophobia/existentialism thing. And then also the like, came back wrong elements.

Morgan

You're so right, oh my god.

Sorren

Because I went in with that expectation of this not maybe being Leah at all. That was interesting. Obviously, there's this question about what does make a person themselves: what's the fundamental delineation between a person and a clone, or a person and a copy or a person and a robot with all of their memories? Etc, etc. But we did not get a forest of wives growing under the sea or something. (Laughs) That was my mental image going in, just like a bunch of them.

Morgan

I do love that trope.

Sorren

I would have loved to get some of Leah's internal experience after the submarine. But then I also wonder if it would be impossible to understand if that makes sense? But maybe you could do something really wild with the writing style there and move into poetry, or into a stream of consciousness, Ducks New[bury]port style, one sentence or something... And just give us some weird insight into what she's experiencing. But then I do also see the point of leaving it unknown, because it is that experience of losing somebody whether they're missing or dead or changed by mental illness or disability, whatever the thing is: You don't have that insight, you don't have that window.

Morgan

I was almost disappointed that we got a reveal at the end of there being a huge, horrifying thing.

Sorren

Yeah, I was a little bit too, we didn't get much detail about it. But...

Morgan

I wish we'd gotten a bit more into depth about like, what it did or what it communicated after Leah give it her name.

Sorren

I think I kind of wanted less or more, if that makes sense?

Morgan

Mm.

Sorren

Either I just kind of didn't really want to know what it is that they saw and leave it as sort of... The classic sort of Lovecraftian, eldritch, "it is beyond comprehension," thing, or seen things about it that only raised more questions. And then not getting any further explanation.

Morgan

I want to know more about Leah's connection to it, I want to know why she's dissolving.

Sorren

Mm-hm?

Morgan

It's implied that it's because they were using the shower that sort of draws in water from the outside, and therefore she says something earlier on about how there was too much water. So I took that to mean because they were using water from outside that doesn't get filtered.

Sorren

I did not pick up on that. But that does make sense.

Morgan

It's very Waters of Mars. If anybody's watched Doctor Who the Doctor Who episode Waters of Mars from 2009. The whole point of that episode is that they're on Mars. And they have these water filters, but they're slightly wrong sized when they're sent in the new delivery. And so even a single drop of water now has enough to like infect them all with this like, watery virus that makes them gush water and be kind of zombies. It very much reminded me of that.

Sorren

I'm not surprised that sounds similar.

Morgan

(Laughs) Absolutely terrified to take a shower for months after.

Sorren

(Laughs) Doctor Who, which has been traumatising children, since I don't know when... the 60s?

Morgan

Yeah, the 60s.

Sorren

The 60s! I think I was actually interpreting it as the weight of the water. Because Miri says that thing about how surely there's too much water on top of them if they descend. That was how I was sort of reading that. Because then also, Leah has the brief thing where she's like, "If I look in to the mirror, I'm going to see someone who's been distorted by the

pressure of all that water." And then she was like, "Well, I look normal. But..."

Morgan

No, yeah, I see that. And there's a whole thing of like, she says, "There are things that came out of the water. But what about things that didn't? How is that like, being down here changes them?" and they were down there for four, five months?

Sorren

Yeah.

Morgan

So maybe... (Laughing) It's a metaphor for the pressure of being alive under modern capitalism.

Sorren

It reminds me of when people take deep sea creatures out of the water and are like, "Wow, this thing looks so stupid!" And it's like, "It's not supposed to be surviving up here, though, so..." I can kind of see that, that they had evolved, in inverted commas, to survive down there. And then when they got removed from that environment, which also kind of makes sense as like, a trauma thing. Like when people have a high stress environment, and then they're not adjusted anymore.

Morgan

Yeah. And she has that line where she's like, "Oh, yeah, my blood doesn't know how to be under this pressure anymore. So it just comes out of my skin sometimes. As you do!"

Sorren

I do think you have a point about the capitalism thing as well, which I think is also a bit why it reminded me of Wolf 359. The horror of things like Miri repeatedly calling the centre and being sent to voicemail, trying to engage with bureaucracy when it's a life or death situation, and you're just trying to jump through groups and fill paperwork and talk to somebody that doesn't care about you and is reading from a script... That was interesting.

Morgan

Oh boy.

Sorren

I feel like I haven't really seen much of that. Again, the only example I can immediately bring to mind is bits of the Magnus Archives like there's that episode in Season Five where everyone is sort of queuing to get murdered.

Morgan

(Laughs)

Sorren

But it's the queueing aspect of it that's sticking in my head here. You've got existential horror of the ocean, which does not care about you on a personal level, and then you've got the existential horror of a corporation, that does not care about you on a personal level. So it sounds bizarre, but it actually seems very logical to link those two ideas.

Morgan

Oh, yeah.

Sorren

And I feel like I'm seeing it more and more in fiction. And I love it. I mean that's a- It's deeply upsetting, and horrifying, etc. But, you know?

Morgan

It's the whole thing of horror reflects the fears of the culture at the time that it's being released. I watched a lot of really good videos by [@mouseabolition] on TikTok about this, and about how, you know, post World War Two, you have a lot of came back wrong stuff and a lot of Cold War fears, so a lot of zombies... Now, it's a lot more existential, it's a lot more a cog in the system. And all the fears are actually just a metaphor for capitalism. And it's really interesting to see that sort of coming into effect in horror at the moment, which we do see a lot. And it's interesting and vibey and upsetting.

Sorren

I think this does very much tap into like, the moment in terms of horror, it feels very current.

Morgan

Julia Armfield's written some nonfiction essays, there's a quote from her essay called "On Body Horror and the Female Body," which is... "I think that writing about women goes hand in hand with horror writing. The female body is a nexus of pain almost by design, but is also potentially monstrous, an object traditionally subjugated both for its presumed weakness and its perceived threat."

Sorren

I like that, particularly, I think, bringing that into a queer context adds another layer to it. Can we talk about the ending?

Morgan

I liked it, it was upsetti-spaghetti, but it was good. I liked tying in the house from her mum, and her very clearly unresolved trauma there. There are so many different metaphors you could take from this .

Sorren

Exactly.

Morgan

But I think especially the letting go one at the end, is very... It's the most literal metaphor in the book, I think. She literally lets her go into the sea.

Sorren

Yeah, I think it was well foreshadowed. From a certain point. I think you could tell that's where it's going, that it doesn't feel predictable, because it feels inevitable, instead. Miri knows that and she's also in denial about it.

Morgan

I feel like as soon as Leah's eyeball falls out, if not before...

Sorren

(Laughs)

Morgan

You're like, "Mm... Yeah, she's... She's got to get back into the sea."

Sorren

Put- Put her back. Put that thing back where it came from or so help me!

Morgan

Especially when Miri just sort of watches it happen. And it's just stated as a fact. It's very sort of like, "Oh, we're on a trajectory here now."

Sorren

I liked that the body horror didn't rely super hard on blood and guts and things. I liked that it was watery-flavoured bloody horror.

Morgan

Squishy!

Sorren

(Laughs) It was still horrifying but I just thought it was fresh. I'm sure there's lots of people that have done people, you know, turning into water, but I haven't read that much horror. So to me, this was new. So I enjoyed it. (Laughs)

Morgan

Are you one of those people, Sorren? Who sees a really common trope...

Sorren

Exactly.

Morgan

But it's in literary fiction, so you're like, "Oh, my God, this is the best thing I've ever seen!"

Sorren

Does this count as literary fiction?

Morgan

I found it in the literary fiction section.

Sorren

Oh, did you?

Morgan

So...

Sorren

'Cause it's not tagged as literary fiction on Goodreads.

Morgan

I think it bridges the gap really interestingly...

Sorren

Yeah.

Morgan

Because it is written like a short story and a lot of people, specifically with sort of the style of short story that she writes, those are more often perceived as literary fiction, even if they are straight-up fantasy.

Sorren

Yeah.

Morgan

Because they are more clearly a metaphor. So I think this sort of bridges that gap.

Sorren

Yeah. Honestly, the label literary fiction kind of just annoys me because it's so meaningless. I...

Morgan

Literary fiction is just a elitist tag that separates- It's like, "Oh, yeah, this is genre fiction, but like, it's special..."

Sorren

Exactly.

Morgan

"So like, you know." It's just people going out of their way to not be perceived as having read science fiction and fantasy and enjoyed it.

Sorren

Yeah.

Morgan

It's very clearly rooted in elitism.

Sorren

Yeah.

Morgan

(Sing-song) I hate it so much.

Sorren

It's- it's irritating. I appreciate okay, maybe literary fiction gets a bit more experimental with form and divests of genre conventions. But that's, you know, what does that mean? It's a descriptor, it's not a genre. You can't be like, this film is a stationary shot throughout the entire film, but it's definitely not fantasy, despite the fact that it has a dragon in it. Like it's still also fantasy, calling it something else seems bizarre.

Morgan

Yeah. Because at that point, you have to start calling the Carmilla the YouTube series, literary fiction for TV.

Sorren

And also at the end of the day is speculative, in inverted commas, fiction is, you know, the oldest kind of story we have. And I think there's a reason for that. Anyway, that was a slight tangent. (Laughs)

Morgan

Yeah, but it's important because we feel very strongly about it here. Sorren, tell me about your thoughts of Our Wives Under the Sea.

Sorren

I really liked it. I don't really know how to talk about it if that makes sense? I know you just talked about it for like, a whole episode. I don't know how to sum it up. There were just lots of things from the prose to the characterisation to the actual ideas in it, to the themes being explored that I really liked about it. And I feel like this is a five star read. Thoroughly enjoyed it. Would recommend losing your mind in the bath with this book.

Morgan

I want to try reading it in the bath now.

Sorren

Morgan, what were your final thoughts?

Morgan

I loved it. She has very quickly become an instant buy for me, especially after reading *Salt Slow*. I will read anything that she writes. I think she's a brilliant writer. And we need more queer vibey writers in our lives, and I love it. Sorren, do you have any recommendations for people who liked this book? And if you don't say the book I'm thinking of, then I will be completely shocked.

Sorren

I think it is probably the book that you are thinking of. The only thing that I could think of, and I was thinking about this, was *Deeplight* by Francis Hardinge. It's very different, so in some ways, I'm kind of hesitant because it is YA fantasy and it feels more in that vein that in horror, the horror is sort of incidental, if that makes sense. Maybe I don't know. I mean, she does write horror.

Morgan

Yeah, I feel like she writes YA horror, especially if you compare like, *Deeplight* and *The Lie Tree*, and *Cuckoo Song* because *Cuckoo Song* is very much YA horror.

Sorren

And actually, *Cuckoo Song* is also an interesting one for this, I think, because it has that whole identity thing and some body horror, from the perspective of the person that's going through it as well, which is interesting. *Deeplight* is about two orphans who scavenge for relics under the ocean, and one of them begins to transform into something strange when they find something unprecedented... And *Cuckoo Song* is kind of a came back wrong story, it's a historical fiction/fantasy about a young girl who wakes up after an accident and discovers that she is... Different. Her sister's terrified of her. She's starving all the time. And she keeps waking up after sleepwalking. And it's very eerie and strange. So those. I've definitely talked about, at least *Deeplight* before on the show, but they're very good. So that is all I will say, Morgan, do you have anything for people that enjoyed this?

Morgan

Definitely read *Salt Slow* if you haven't already. It's incredible vibes. And it leads very cleanly from one to the other. In the same week, somehow, I read the *Lamplighters* by Emma Stonex, which is more mystery than any sort of fantasy. But it's about these three people who work at a lighthouse

and they all go missing. It's told in two perspectives. One is 20 years later from the point of view of all three wives and them being left behind. And then one is the narrative of what actually happened from the point of view of the lamplighters and it sort of alternates and it's very much like begins eliding, and everyone's going into a bit insane and there's a lot of like, ruminations on the sea, which I think was very vibey... But if you're looking for fantasy, you aren't gonna get it. I'm trying to think of a sapphic book because I feel like I should recommend a sapphic but...

Sorren

You recommended *Our Wives Under the Sea* after we read *Gideon*, I think.

Morgan

Oh, yeah, I mean if you like Catholic inspired horror with lots of disaster lesbians I mean, read *Gideon the Ninth*.

Sorren

And some existential horror, as well.

Morgan

Existential horror, body horror, it very nicely jigsaws...

Sorren

Next time, I'm making Morgan read *Lakelore* by Anna Marie McLemore. We're doing another McLemore. It's been one year so I think I'm allowed...

Morgan

I mean, considering we've done two Tamsyn Muir books in six months.

Sorren

That's true, and I guess we've done two Freya Marske books.

Morgan

This is also true.

Sorren

And I'm very excited for Morgan to read this and... I won't say anything about it, as usual.

Morgan

But until then, you're always welcome through the bookcase.

Sorren

Don't forget to scratch the cat on your way out.

[THEME MUSIC FADES IN.]

Sorren

Thank you for listening to The Hidden Bookcase, a production of Planar Prod. On this episode you heard Morgan Greensmith and Sorren Briarwood discussing *Our Wives Under the Sea* by Julia Armfield with editing by Kit Lovick. You can find out more about this book at juliaarmfield.co.uk. You can find Armfield on Twitter @JuliaArmfield.

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If you're enjoying The Hidden Bookcase, please consider leaving us a rating or a review. Or you can always tell a friend how to find us- your whispers are the best way for bookworms to discover our show.

On our next episode which will be out on Monday the 19th of June we'll be discussing *Lakelore* by Anna-Marie McLemore. We hope to see you then, and in the meantime, you're always welcome through the bookcase.