

Episode 81:
An Apology, And A Collection of Recs

Transcribed by:
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[00:00]

A: Hello, and welcome to Be the Serpent, a podcast of extremely deep literary merit with your classy and sophisticated hosts Alexandra Rowland, Freya Marske, and Jennifer Mace. On today's episode, we are taking a break from tropes to gush about some of our favourite recent and upcoming works.

[intro music plays]

A: Hello and welcome to episode 81: An Apology, And A Collection of Recs. I am Alex and I am the Fantasy one.

F: I am Freya and I am the Romance one.

M: I am Macey and I am the Young Adult one.

F: We are three red-headed fantasy authors and before we do move on to what we have been reading lately we would like to issue a long overdue apology and talk explicitly about some of the work that we have been doing and we will be doing on the podcast. For background, in [Episode 71](#) we featured Naomi Novik as a guest and we discussed her new book *A Deadly Education*. Around the time that this episode aired there were some reviews and critiques coming out of certain aspects of that book, particularly but not limited to [the inclusion of a racist stereotype concerning Black hair](#). We made a brief segment in [Episode 72](#) saying that as white readers who still have many areas of ignorance that content went right over our heads during our reading that book. Some fans of the podcast then tried to engage with us and request that we explain the situation further, that we add more context and especially some content warnings to those episodes to prevent harm to any readers of colour who might be harmed by the content of the book. We would like to sincerely apologise about how we handled that and for the long period of wilfully not listening and silence which was a product of our own white privilege. We fucked that one up and we are really sorry. We have now added more context along with links to some of those reviews and critiques in the transcripts and shownotes of both episodes and we've added a content warning to the audio of Episode 71. And we wanted to spend some time on it now to tell you about other actions that we're taking because we have realised that keeping all of our deliberations and discussion private, not owning up to our mistakes and being open about our goals was part of that fucking up.

A: Yup. Basically we just want to be a little bit more transparent about what we're doing and the changes that we're making going forward because also I think that these are some really positive and good things for the podcast, I think that this is going to make a better podcast overall.

M: Yeah, I think that, to be perfectly explicit, we want to make strides at being actively anti-racist not just not actively racist. Because those are different things.

A: Mhm, mhm.

F: Yes.

A: Right. One of the changes going forward, from now on we're going to be a little more conscientious about Content Warnings. I think in the past we have been saying out loud during the audio of the episode if there's a content warning for a book that we think is necessary to mention like "Oh, just be aware there are some depictions of child abuse in this episode" but we think that it's worthwhile to put those in the actual shownotes so that people have that heads up before they go into the actual episode, so that they can be as informed as possible.

M: Yeah and I think just being a little bit more systematic about it, a little bit more structured which can only help for anyone who's trying to consume media safely.

F: Yeah cause I think those have been coming a bit ad hoc at the moment.

M: Exactly. Right.

F: We've sort of been saying them as it occurs to us in a discussion so we want to try and put in a system so that this is happening on a more regular basis.

M: Mhm.

A: Yes!

M: And you know, trying to figure out what things we want to tag for, how do we want to tag for that and also, do that both for the media that we're discussing and for the places that our discussion goes during the episode because sometimes that goes a little bit to other places because works have implications and those are things that we are trying to pick apart in this podcast but that's part of the content and it should also be warned for!

A: Right, right. So going forward you will probably see more of that, well, not probably. You will. You will see more of that in the show notes just as we're trying to be a bit more conscientious and, frankly, caring, about our audience's experiences. So the other significant thing that we are doing going forward... Actually, a little bit of backstory because I think that this is really cool of the person who brought us to our attention. Last summer we got an email from a listener who

put together an entire spreadsheet of every tentpole we have ever done and emailed that to us and said “hey, you kind of have been tentpoling a lot of white works and maybe you want to be aware of that?” and that was incredibly incredibly useful and so to that listener I want to say thank you, so much for doing that work because that’s definitely a change that we have wanted to make.

M: So after we received that feedback we took a more conscious look at the demographics of the works that we’re promoting and discussing on this show and we decided that one of the things we wanted to get better at was tracking and making sure that we were having more works, more professional works by people of colour featured on the show in the tentpole position, which is really their, you know, rightful place. And that is something that we’ve been doing for a while but we haven’t discussed it in public which means that people can’t keep us honest. So now we’re being more explicit about that and we’re making our commitment to you, our listeners and our audience and that commitment is that for every episode that’s a three tentpole episode we will have a minimum of one professional work by a POC, by a BIPOC, either as a novella, a novel, a film, or a TV show, something that is Not White. And I wanted to take a little bit of a spin, explaining a little about how we pick tentpoles because I think it’s relevant. So. We come up with episode ideas in a lot of different ways but one of the key ways that we build an episode is around a particular piece of fiction or media that we love. And in my mind I kind of think of this as the seed tentpole right? You guys kind of know what I mean?

[F & A hum agreement]

M: And one of the things that I’m going to try to do because my brain is full of pieces of fiction and I tend to read quite fast so a lot of the time it tends to be me—

A: Do you Macey?

F: Do you really??

M: Buddies. Buddies. I’m sorry it’s not my fault it’s just how my brain makes connections.

[All laugh]

M: So since a lot of the times I’m the one saying “Why don’t we do this episode”, “Why don’t we do an Apocalypse episode” I’m going to be tracking. Are those seed tentpoles, the ones that we try and build an ep around, are those white? Or not? So for example we have an episode coming up that I’m really excited to record that we haven’t recorded yet around post climate apocalypse fiction! And that has been sitting in the back of my mind for a long while now because of [Trail of Lightning](#) by Rebecca Roanhorse which is a work that we talked about in our Hugo Finalist Novel episode, lo, these infinitely many years ago when the Hugo’s were things that we went to in meatspace—

[bitter lockdown laugh]

F: Ah, conventions, remember those?

A: I remember conventions, yeah.

M: It's just a really good book, you guys, and I think we could have a lot to talk about on that topic so we are definitely going to do that.

A: Yup, yeah.

F: And as Macey said we are definitely going to keep that to professional works by creators of colour, basically for the reason that there is no way to tell the race of an author of fanfic and it's pretty intrusive to attempt to guess or ascertain their race, and so we have no way to be held accountable in that sense, and so we are not counting fanfic in that way of having at least one professional creator of colour when we are talking about episodes with multiple tentpoles.

A: Yeah because fan writers I think deserve a certain amount of anonymity unless they specifically and explicitly choose to waive that anonymity.

M: Right. And I think that also we want to promote work that will earn money for the people who write it which is not what fanfic does! That's not what it's for!

A: Yeah, there is also that! There is a material element to be helping people with as well.

M: So, those are a couple other things that we are working on, dear listeners, and we wanted to share with you, out loud, and we hope that they were interesting to you. But now, I have been promised a treat, which I never get to do!

A: Yes, Macey gets a treat.

M: Macey gets a treat this time. I have a scripted line.

A: Ham it up girl!

M: But before we get into the rest of the episode, what are we reading fellow Slerpents?

F: I'm sorry I don't know how to answer that question when it's coming from someone who isn't Alex?

[Slerpents all laugh]

F: Alright! So, as usual I have been reading all of the books—

A: We know.

F: —so the ones that I would like to particularly talk about today... I have read two sapphic Aliette de Bodard novels recently, because Aliette just keeps on producing amazing novellas. So the first that I've read is [Seven of Infinities](#) which is another in her Xuya universe and that one is a murder mystery which is also a romance between a scholar and a spaceship—

M: [laughs]

A: [laughs] That's such an Aliette de Bodard... yeah!

F: It's such an Aliette de Bodard pitch, yeah, and it has made me want more love stories involving spaceships! So, if that sounds like your kind of thing....

A: Every Aliette de Bodard novella is “there is a scholar and they're in love with a BLANK” and the blank is never another person it's always a dragon, or a spaceship—

M: A dragon!

A: We love that from her!

F: Well half of that is true about the other novella that I read from her which is called [Fireheart Tiger](#) and it's just come out. This one is a sapphic love triangle between two diplomacy princesses and also a fire spirit—

A: She's so on brand! I love her!

F: She is so on brand!

M: She's valid!

F: And that one was pitched as “*Howl's Moving Castle* meets *The Goblin Emperor*”—

A: Hello, yes, hello!

F: Sounds like something you'd be into, yeah? So I just finished that one, I snacked it up really quickly, it's quite a short novella and I thoroughly recommend that one. Moving to slightly longer books I also recently read an ARC of [The Jasmine Throne](#) which is the start of Tasha Suri's new epic fantasy series...

M: How do you two get all the ARCs? No one sends me ARCs!

F: I go looking for them! I pester my agent, I pester the authors, I pester people I know in publishing houses and I say “GIVE ME THE ARCs”.

M: Freya is displaying Freya's long hidden Slytherin side.

F: Exactly. Exactly. Anyway I was lucky enough to get hold of this. This is a phenomenal book. I loved Tasha's first two books, the Books of Ambha but this is a level up just on every level: the worldbuilding, the character work, the plot... And this is also sapphic, it features the sister of an empress who is trapped in a tower and the handmaiden who is hiding powerful magic and who ends up befriending her, and they become reluctant allies, and there's just so much going on, it's just very good...

M: Yes!

F: Very, not easy to get through, there is some really heavy stuff going on in it but a fantastic book and a really exciting start to a new series.

M: Nice!

F: And the last two I want to talk about on lighter notes, I read, again an ARC of the new Cat Sebastian romance which is coming out later this year and it's called [*The Queer Principles of Kit Webb*](#) and it's a MLM romance that's set in the Georgian Era, so pre-Regency. More wigs, more beauty marks, more tight silk breeches in exciting colours!

M: God...

F: And this is a romance between a retired highwayman and the young nobleman who hires him for a job and it involves a lot of sitting around flirting in coffee shops and it's just great. Really charming.

[various gasps of delight from M]

A: I was just offered an ARC of this book and I said yes please!

M: This is what I... You... [incomprehensible dramatic mouthsounds] you see people just!

A: You have to be less British polite about it Macey, you have to slide into people's DMs and be like "Heyyyyyy I love you".

M: I cannot. I cannot.

A: I know, that's why you don't get ARCs!

F: But that's why you have an agent! You just have to slide into Kurestin's DMs and be like "Please be aggressive on my behalf!"

A: You can do that.

M: I can't do that! She's so busy!

F: Okay.

A: Well. I don't know how to help you babe.

F: So the last ARC which I did get by shamelessly begging the author or at least being very loud about it on twitter is a novella by Alix E. Harrow. This novella is called [A Spindle Splintered](#) which is difficult to say five times fast—

M: That is difficult!

F: —and it also has an amazing pitch which is “Spider-verse but make it Sleeping Beauty”.

A: Okay. Okay.

M: Huh!

A: Okay. Okay.

F: Okay so the [Into the Spider-verse](#) aspect of this is the idea of multiverse versions of the same base story and base characters, and it's about a very angry young woman who ends up Spiderversing her way to a fairytale and meeting a lot of other versions of the Sleeping Beauty character, and they have to go on a quest. Alix Harrow is amazing at angry women and the righteous anger of women, and it also contains a line referencing a tumblr meme which I'm not going to spoil for anyone because when it happened I was so angry that I went into DMs and yelled to Alix about it. So I think this one is not out for a little while but definitely keep an eye out for when it does come out. Again, it's a quick read and absolutely delightful on every level. So that's me. I'm done.

A: That's also a very like, on brand Alix Harrow book.

M: That's true. It has been a while since we talked about what books we read and I have read some stuff!

[15:00]

M: I have read Jenn Lyons' second book [The Name of All Things](#), which is a battle horse girl book with demons, and dragons, and fuck gender!

A: Fuck gender, first of all, fuck gender, gender is a lie and a trap—

M: So write that down.

A: And also this is very much a horse girl book.

F: So basically you take *The Saddle Club* and throw it in a cauldron with the words “fuck gender” and a very large dragon.

A: Fuck gender.

M: And a lot of demons, and all the demon hunt, and possession, and Jenn did a thing in the end of the book that is not spoilers because I don't think anyone will be as mad about this as I am, but she made magical poison rock that's just radiation and I'm so mad at her!

A: Because it's so fucking good.

M: Ahhh, anyway, that's a good book. It's a big chunk of a book as well.

A: It's a chonker.

M: I also tripped and fell and read half a million words of Batfamily-Avengers crossover fic?

F: Ohh, so on-brand.

A: Macey...

M: There was— There was— There was an OT3 fic in which, what was it, Jason Todd and Bucky Barnes end up with baby Tony Stark after his dad has just been killed by Bucky Barnes?

A: OK?

M: And they're running around stabbing things, and having superhero adventures, and punching Hydra in the face, and it's just a lot.

A: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

M: And sometimes you just need to read a fic full of punching things, and those were all by an author called [thepartyresponsible](#), and the OT3 one is called [Do Every Stupid Thing](#). It's very good. And then we, well... So I had a loss in the family last week, a week and a bit ago, and so that was happening for a little while so I really wanted to be reading things with families in them since I couldn't be with my family, so I read a lot of really amazing young adult books that I'd had waiting for me on my shelf that I'd been looking forward to. And I'll talk about those a little bit later in more detail, but particularly shoutout to [Star Daughter](#), [Elatsoe](#), and [Raybearer](#), which we will definitely get into later. That's what I've been reading.

A: Wonderful, wonderful. I have been watching a whole passel of TV shows lately, first up was [Bridgerton](#), I watched that when that first came out, binged it in one sitting, so good, so good! A lot of people were... I saw some people being stupid on Twitter about, like, "This is like Jane Austen but bad!" Shut up, no it's not Jane Austen, it's a Regency historical romance novel.

M: It's [Gossip Girl](#).

A: Yeah, it's *Gossip Girl*, it's Regency romance, it's a romance novel in the form of a TV show, and it's brilliant, and it's good, and it has all of the drama, and all of the, "Oh no, my reputation!" and *beautiful* men swanning about in extremely tight pants just being the most gorgeous things, and the costume porn, and all of the good things. All of the things you like, dear listeners, all of the things you like. I also, on Freya's recommendation—

[F laughing evilly in the background]

A: —watched a Japanese drama called [Cherry Magic!](#) Freya slid into my DMs like, "Alex, I have found the show for you." And we kind of watched it at the same time but you were seven episodes ahead of me. It is full of tropes—

F: So I kept promising you things that were coming up.

A: Oh God! So it's full of tropes, it is about a young man who turns— well, I guess turning 30, you're not so much a young man anymore. It is about a very cute man, is what I mean, a very cute man who turns 30 and in this world—

M: Alex, says the only 30 year old on this podcast.

A: Yeah. I'm the baby!

[Serpents laugh]

A: For another two weeks, I'm the baby. So he turns 30 and in this world, if you turn 30 and you're still a virgin, you gain magical powers.

[M groans in the background]

A: And the magical powers you get are that if you touch another person, you can read their thoughts. And he pretty much immediately discovers that his hottest coworker is in love with him and has these technicolor domestic fantasies about bringing him coffee in the mornings and cooking food for him, and it's extremely gay, and really just the tooth-rotting sweetest thing you've ever seen. Highly recommend it. I have also been watching a historical Chinese drama called [Sleuth of the Ming Dynasty](#), which is about a slutty twink with his cheeks full of snacks, and a snack in each hand, and his pockets full of snacks, and his twelve sugar daddies, and together they solve crimes.

M: I was just waiting for you to say, and he is, himself, a snack.

A: He is, himself, a snack as well, it's true!

M: Ayyyy!

F: He looks like a chipmunk!

A: He's a snack, and he always wants snacks, and his sugar daddies are like, "Let me buy you all the snacks you want while we solve murders and crimes." One of his sugar daddies is the emperor of China, so that's cool.

[Serpents succumb to laughter]

M: That's a lot of snacks!

A: It's a lot of snacks! This year I am also working on a personal project, which is that I am learning to read Chinese, and to teach myself that I've been practicing translating a novel called [*Invitation to Wine*](#) by Tang Jiu Qing, which obviously doesn't have an English translation otherwise I would just be reading it in English, so I'm sorry for any of our listeners who don't speak Mandarin, but for those who do, we'll include a link in the show notes for it! I don't know really what it's about yet because I'm only two chapters into it. A boy is getting beaten to death on the order of the emperor because of some shit that his dad did. Is good!

M: That's how C-dramas, or C-novels, webnovels?

A: Yeah, it's a webnovel. So that's everything I've been reading. I think we should have an episode now because I also want to be yelling about some other cool stuff that we've been reading. So with the earlier discussion that we were having, we wanted to leave as much space as we needed to have that discussion and go into it in as much detail as we were going to, so rather than having three tentpoles that are centered around a theme, we're spending the rest of this episode doing one of our excited yelling episodes where we pitch works to each other. So each of us has picked out a work by an author of color, and each of us is championing a particular genre. So I think that Macey is going to start us out, Macey is telling us about YA, correct?

M: Yes! Well, we're not really doing all of a genre, genres are large, guys, genres are big, did you know that?

A: Yes.

F: And YA contains multitudes.

A: Oh my God, yeah.

M: YA contains multitudes. So specifically Macey is talking about a novel that I have been meaning to read for a while now and I finally got the time, I'm going to be talking about *Raybearer* by Jordan Ifueko, and it is an epic fantasy YA. And I am ridiculously impressed by this book because it's, like, 380 words— words long? Yes Macey, that's a book.

F: Wow, what a great book!

M: I read it in 30 seconds!

A: A long book.

M: No, it is 380 pages long, dear listeners, don't let me sell it short, and Jordan gets so much into that it's obscene. You know when you're starting a book, and there's this hook, and you're like, oh, this is the problem, this is going to be the thing that bites the main character in the ass, it's gonna be resolved at the conclusion of the book? So she hits you with one of them, she's like, this character, her father is a god of the Veldt that has been imprisoned, and treated as a djinn, and got three wishes from the mother. Oh no, this is big, this is bad! She resolves that by the end of Act I and gives you another one. And does that two more times, and I'm like, how?! How... Anyway.

A: Yeah, it's some cool structure stuff.

M: It's super cool. So this is a novel about a young girl called Tarisai who lives in a world with a global empire that is ruled by a single emperor and his eleven council members. And because of course this is YA, we know where this is going. Tarisai has to go and become eligible, and audition, and prove herself to become a member of the council for the heir to the throne. And the emperor, every time that he anoints one of his council members, he gains immunity to one type of death. And so there's this very Knights of the Round Circle kind of trope, which I really love. But the problem of course is that Tarisai's mother has raised her alone and isolated in this little house with a bunch of retainers who aren't allowed to touch her, she's a very touch-starved, affection-starved little girl who knows nothing about politics, or the state of the empire, or who is who. And right before eleven year old Tarisai is sent off to the capitol to try to audition to become a member of the council, her mother takes her aside and uses her last wish with the djinn to say, "You will see this young boy, and when he anoints you, you will kill him."

A: Oh shit!

M: So Tarisai is sent— This is still Act I, people!

A: Right, right!

M: I'm going to be very careful not to spoil anything that happens after the midpoint of the book because you should all go read this, dear listeners, because it's amazing, but this is Act I. So Tarisai, little eleven year old Tarisai, is sent off as a sleeper agent because members of the council are the only ones who can kill the emperor. They gain an immunity to a type of death, but not if it's coming from one of the council members.

A: From that person, yeah, yeah, yeah!

F: I have to say, knowing the history of politics as we do, this seems like a very unstable system for this land to have developed! Oh, nobody can kill the emperor except for the very important, powerful people who are closest to the emperor and might have some kind of reason to want him dead!

[A & M laughing]

M: This is the thing, every time you turn around, there's a plot hole or a worldbuilding hole you look at and think, what if it was like this? And Jordan Ifueko has already thought of it and filled it in. So the only way that an emperor can anoint a council member — remember that they're children, they're all children — is if they love each other.

A: Ohhhhhh.

M: They have to love each other, they have a telepathic connection and he offers this love back to them.

A: I love all of these tropes, Macey, oh my God! These are all very good tropes!

M: Right? And so the emperor can offer to as many of the— They have basically an entire palace full of children from all of the realms, all of the most talented magically gifted children who are auditioning, and the emperor will try to make connections with them, but it won't take unless they both genuinely love each other.

F: Sorry, just to clarify, this is the emperor-to-be who is...?

M: Yes, sorry, this is the heir to the throne.

F: I was going to say, I'm like, why would an emperor have a council of eleven year olds, that seems silly, but I think I'm just misunderstanding the pitch.

M: So the emperor can die of old age so they're not immortal, but they're immune to the eleven ways of death.

A: That's very cool.

F: So at which point does the new emperor, the one who's being raised with his Knights of the Round Table eleven year olds, become the new emperor? Surely not for a very long time.

M: When their father dies of old age.

F: OK, so they've got a long lifetime of just hanging around with your eleven telepathic buddies until that happens.

M: Yep. And each of the eleven council members ends up with a particular role. One of them will end up being the religious head of the realm, one of them will end up being the chief judge, one of them will end up being the chief general, and so the council of the current reigning emperor holds those chairs, but the council members of the heir are also in training and doing those jobs. So they are all actually acting as civil servants, or politicians, or, you know, a general, and I haven't even gotten to the coolest part!

A: Wait, there's more? It gets cooler than this?

M: Oh, there's so much more! You guys don't understand, this book is so good! So it's a worldwide empire and each of the countries is almost continent sized, and they were melded together in order to stand up against the demonic armies—

A: Shit.

M: —below the earth—

A: Shit. OK.

M: —who will come, and eat them all, and curse them all with plagues if they don't sacrifice 300 children to them every year.

A: Ooooooh.

M: And the children are marked at birth—

A: Here's the thing about YA! Here's the thing I'll tell you about YA, is that YA goes fucking hard! YA goes harder than any other genre, especially on the Rule of Cool!

M: And OK, I haven't gotten to the romance bit yet.

A: God, this book!

M: This book has everything!

A: At the beginning of this you were like, “300 or however many pages long and she fits so much in there,” and I was like, oh, OK, so she fits a normal amount in there. No!

M: No, no! This is... I can't, it's just so much. OK, so the rule is that the only— So council members are not allowed to have a romance or sleep with anyone who isn't the emperor.

A: [in distress] OK. OK, so Macey...

F: So it's council-slash-harem.

M: Yes.

A: Macey...

[M cackles delightedly]

A: Macey, I love this trope!

M: It's so good!

A: It's got built-in liege and loyal retainer!

M: Oh yes! It does! And here is a minor spoiler for a revelation from slightly later in the book...

A: OK...?

M: So skip the next 30 seconds if you want, dear listeners. The heir to the empire is ace.

A: Ooooh! Ooooh! OK! Alright, alright, alright.

M: And so all of the council members are like, “Well...”

A: I guess we're fucked in that we're not fucked!

[30:03]

M: But then everyone ignores this rule anyways and has illicit affairs and they have this specific tree that makes singing noises and everyone is like just go to the fucking tree. Just take your lover to the fucking tree.

[laughter]

A: Okay, alright. I'm into it. I'm into it. I love this.

M: They're like eighteen, nineteen by the end of this book. They're all pairing off. Like, yeah, no, we're definitely chaste, but also there's this tree.

A: This is all incredible. I love this.

M: It's amazing! And the other--another great trope in this book. All of the different realms, the Emperor's realm, Tarisai's realm that she's from, kind of African nations. Some of the other realms are like this is the European realm. There are different races and ethnicities across the whole nation, and that is fairly... there's not a lot of prejudice about race in this world. There's a little bit of tension between the countries just as nationality things, but this world goes hard on the misogyny. You've got to have something to stack the deck against some characters to give you something to fight against. And so as the story unwraps and as the story progresses and you learn more about, you know, the evil mother of the main character, you start to realize, okay, so she's been fucked over too. So, the trope! Misogyny fucks everyone. It's a queer-norm world and it's fine to have relations between people of the same gender but also, women are not allowed to be certain things. Like emperors. And the one female emperor in history has basically been erased from history.

F: Well this sounds amazing.

A: Yeah.

F: And I'm--

M: --It is.

F: --going to be adding that to my library list immediately.

M: It's so good and I'm really, really mad that the second one isn't out yet. Also, it's a duology apparently? And so somehow she's going to cram the whole--we didn't... we did not resolve the demons in book one. And so all of this is going to have to happen in one more young adult length book.

A: Gosh.

M: And I'm not ready.

A: Gosh. You know. Sometimes someone is just so fucking good at their job--

M: --They're just too powerful?

A: Too powerful. Just too powerful, yeah.

M: Too powerful!

A: Wow.

M: And this is a debut as well, so--

A: --HOLY FUCK!

M: Yeah! Right?

A: Jesus! Alright, alright. Okay.

M: Yeah, so Jordan Ifueko. Write that one down because you're gonna wanna be watching it.

A: Yeah. For sure.

M: But I want to talk a little bit about YA in general. And I do feel like young adult--that authors of color, young adult authors of color have been putting out so many amazing books and I want to give a shout out to the other one that I read the other week which is *Elatsoe*. Which, Freya, did you read this one?

F: No. My library has a lot of holds on it and so it has not come in yet.

M: As well it should!

F: Yes. It's on my list.

M: But this one is by Darcie Little Badger, and it's like a familial murder mystery and the main character has the power to summon ghosts of animals. And at one point she summons ghost trilobites.

A: Okay.

M: And it's the coolest shit!

A: Okay. Into it.

M: And she ends up accidentally yeeting herself into the Jurassic period.

A: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

M: At one point she has to be rescued--rescue herself from the memory of prehistoric coal.

F: She sounds so cool.

A: This sounds really familiar.

M: She's so cool.

A: This sounds really familiar. And I don't think that I have read this but it sounds incredibly familiar and I can't figure out why. Please continue.

M: You may follow Darcie on Twitter, so maybe Darcie has said something about it and you saw it there?

A: Maybe. That could be it.

M: But also, this main character is, very early on in the book, like well what do I want to do with my life? If I go to college I want to be either a paranormal investigator or a paleontologist.

A: Mood. Mood.

M: And I'm like, you are the coolest.

A: Yeah.

M: You are the coolest, kid. And the other one that I read this past week is *Star Daughter* by my friend, Sveta Thakrar, who, Alex, I believe you also know.

A: Yes!

M: And this is a portal fantasy!

A: She introduced us! We need to shout out Sveta for introducing us.

M: Yes! Indeed!

A: And being the reason this podcast exists.

M: And *Star Daughter* is this sparkling, celestial fantasy about a young, Indian girl whose mother is a star. And when she has an accident with her super powers, she has to go up to the celestial court and try to negotiate for the healing blood to heal her father, who she has accidentally hurt. And so, having a lot of feelings about family this past week, it was amazing to read something about a girl kind of negotiating a really fraught relationship with her parents and with herself and coming out of it stronger, and you know, knowing who she was.

F: I think YA fantasy, given that it's quite a busy space, the stuff that comes out often has the most amazing hooks.

M: Oh yes.

F: And there's some really incredible work being done in it. I think partly because it does contain multitudes, there is a little more leeway to just fuck around a bit with genre. Because in adult fantasy there's a little bit of an expectation, I think it's getting a little more vague around the edges, but there is still very much this idea that you have to be writing historical fiction, historical fantasy, or epic fantasy, or science fantasy, which of the fantasies are you doing? But because YA fantasy is still considered its own genre, you can just do whatever the fuck you want.

M: Well, and I think I will say this. As someone who was trying to sell YA for a little while there, I think you can do a lot, but you have to have amazing pacing, right?

F: Mhm.

A: Yeah.

M: You have to have a really strong hook, and your pacing has to go bam! bam! bam!

F: Yes.

M: And I think all three of the authors that I mention really have a solid grasp on that.

F: I have to say, it's the same as when I read a really good novella. I'm just in awe of when I read a really good YA of just how much people can cram into a short space. Because as someone who is naturally very long winded, [chuckling from all Serpents] I have a very great admiration for people who can pull off this kind of sleek storytelling.

A: Yep.

M: Mm. Mhm.

A: Yep, yep.

M: So yes, dear listeners, you should probably pick up many of those. And if you're digging back a little further, if I'm thinking back the past few years of what's come out, I wanted to also give a shout out to [The Belles](#) for having epic, fucky plant worldbuilding and a magic system based around plastic surgery. And to [Wild Beauty](#), again, for having amazing weird plant magic and all sorts of queer investigation and family feelings and what is gender and who do I want to be.

A: Cool. May I?

M: Yes! Macey is done shouting infinitely many book names. I just, am really excited about YA right now.

A: I mean, there's a lot to be excited about YA right now, seriously. And I wish that more people would take YA seriously because of the amazing work that is being done in YA. Like I said, YA goes hard.

M: Oh yeah.

A: Yeah. Incredible stuff. So, first of all, I have to introduce this tentpole that I am going to be pitching to you guys, with an apology to our listeners, because this book doesn't come out until July of this year.

M: Alex!

A: I'm really sorry! But I really wanted to yell about it! So the book is [*She Who Became the Sun*](#) by Shelley Parker-Chan. And it is incREDIBLE? It's extremely good. It is a Chinese historical fantasy about a girl whose name--she eventually becomes known by the name Zhu Chongba through plot events that I won't go too much into. I'm going to have to--here's the thing. I don't want to tell you too much about the plot because it hasn't come out, so I don't want to give you any spoilers whatsoever just because it's not fair to the listeners and it's not fair to Shelley as an author to have the work talked about that openly. But it is incredible and I do want to talk about why it is so cool and why you need to go put it on your pre order list right now, dear listeners. So this book is about Zhu Chongba, whose family dies in a famine and she sneaks away and pretends to be a boy so she can join a monastery. And this whole book has so much to do about the themes of fate and destiny and what is your fate in compa--can you steal someone's fate from them?

M: Mhm.

A: And the thing that's really cool and the thing that I was thinking about a lot is that in Western media in particular, we spend a lot of time putting a lot of weight on character agency. There's this obsession in Western literature that your main character has to have agency. And that's something that I as an author struggle with a lot, because I like to write about sad crying boys. Who sit there and do nothing until the plot happens to them.

[laughter]

A: Calling myself out here but we all know it's true. And, here's the thing. This is not to say that Shelley's protagonist does not have agency, because she absolutely does! She is one of the most ambitious protagonists that I have ever read. But the fact that fate and destiny play such a huge role in this book just got me thinking a lot about the preconceived notions we have about how to structure a story and how a story is supposed to work, and the engine of the story. There's a couple points in the book where--I'm going to speak metaphorically here--where fate takes someone by the hand and leads them forward, to something. And if it was less explicitly about fate and destiny, I think that could have been interpreted as a sort of deus ex machina, and again, that is something that we have decided in Western literature, is a bad thing for whatever

stupid reason, right? Except, the thing that you can do with that--when you accept that it's not a bad thing or a good thing, it's just a neutral thing, it's just a tool, you can use that to pull off some really fucking cool shit. And Shelley Parker-Chan does that in this book. With those themes of fate and destiny, contrasted with that is the character agency. Is Zhu Chongba's personal ambition and personal drive. And the part of this which, you need some context about Chinese culture and about Buddhism and Daoism, because this core kind of tenet of Buddhism is that desire is the root of all suffering, right? And by desire we mean wanting things, attachments to things. And the idea is that if you can let go of attachments then that brings you closer to achieving enlightenment. So wanting your destiny and chasing your destiny is a kind of wanting. And this book confronts that. Confronts that desire is the root of all suffering fairly explicitly. Because there's a line in the book about how yes desire does bring suffering, but that's better than not desiring because that means you're still alive, right? You're still living. And, yeah. Just very, very cool. And it ties in a little more subtly with themes about hunger and the ways in which a person can starve for wanting things.

F: Yeah. When I read this, I think the opening chapter, which opens with the famine and this family of peasants suffering in a famine, was so gripping, even though not very much, in the technical sense, "happens", but just the vividness with which you are presented this absolutely hopeless situation is absolutely incredible. And again, I'm not going to talk too much on a spoilery level. But you can probably tell from the title and the fact that Shelley has been fairly open that this is a reimagining of the life and the journey of an actual figure in Chinese history, that this person is destined for greatness. And just like with a romance novel, you know how it's going to end. You know where this story is heading in general. You know that this is the story of somebody's ascent.

A: Yep.

F: There's going to be twists and turns along the way, but you know that there's going to be a basically upwards trajectory in terms of power and status for this person and so most of the tension and the joy of the narrative comes from seeing this person is starting in such a low, helpless position. How is the author, and the character, going to get them upwards?

A: Yes.

F: And that's what the joy of the story was. You're right. It's not about, oh, I want there to be a surprise, I want there to be agency that's going to trick me. You know basically what the first book is going to do, but you want to know how. And that keeps you turning pages.

A: Yeah, yeah.

M: The weirdest editorial comment I ever got was the comment on a short story that, if you write in first person there's no tension because you know the narrator is going to survive

A: That is weird. And. Mn. Okay. Okay.

M: And this is the exact proof of that. We talk a lot on this episode--on this episode. On this show--we haven't for awhile--about how fiction and media is a meal that you consume that does different things. Different types of story feed you different ways.

A: Yes.

M: Right. And this is one of those. It's the joy of saying this should be impossible but do we trust in the author and let them bring us to that conclusion.

A: Right. Right. And like Freya said, it's about the journey and not the destination, because you do know how it ends. But because it is so much about power, you don't know--you don't know how she's getting there. And you don't know what the cost of getting there is going to be. You don't know if the person who gets there is going to be the same person who she was when she started out. What is she going to have to sacrifice about herself in order to chase this ambition?

[45:18]

M: And now you're making me think about [*Baru Cormorant*](#).

A: Yes, actually! Yes, quite. Yes.

F: Yep.

A: That's a very very apt comparison, yeah.

F: I think that when I read it a year ago, that's what I tweeted. I said, 'Anyone who likes Baru Cormorant, you will like this'. And I stand by it.

A: Yes.

[M laughs]

A: It also had a lot of like... very, very cool gender— back to Fuck Gender.

[F + M giggle]

A: I've read several other stories where like, someone has to disguise themselves as a different gender. And they never really like, dig into that. And *She Who Became the Sun* absolutely does. And Shelley Parker-Chan does it from two directions, actually. Because there— the main antagonist, General Ouyang, who is my favorite character, and I love him to pieces— So Zhu, the protagonist, is kind of like, has all of these nonbinary feelings. Because like, she gives up her femininity, and her attachment to female-ness in order to become a monk. And she like,

lives as a monk for so long that that's who she is. And her engagement with herself as a woman or woman-adjacent person is a significant part of her plot arc.

A: And then on the other side you have General Ouyang, who is a eunuch. And I will tell you a little bit about his backstory, because it's not too much of a spoiler. His father, I believe, committed treason. And so nine generations of his family is cursed, and they killed off every male in his family and sold the women into slavery. And Ouyang was the— I forget what his first name is, he's just General Ouyang in the text. But Ouyang was like, nine years old or so at the time, and he begged for his life, and so they castrated him in order to keep him alive. And so he is seen by everyone else as being not quite a man, and not really anything else? So it's— this amazing way of looking at gender in the context of the setting, through these two different viewpoints: someone who chose it, and someone who absolutely didn't choose it.

[M hums with interest]

A: And how that colors their approach to gender? And how they see— both their own gender, and also how they approach gender of others. So yeah, fascinating, really, really good stuff. Also, fucktons of fealty. Like, people are kneeling right and left. And General Ouyang absolutely is my favorite. Again, huge spoilers here which I cannot tell you about right now. But the internal conflicts that he has are just like, so juicy and good. And I am— I am just like, deeply, deeply into this book. It's everything that I love in a book. And like, Shelley's descriptions are so vivid. And her grasp of like, setting?

[M hums in agreement]

A: Is... so visceral. Like, I got, I was getting chills constantly. It's amazing. It's great stuff. So basically, yeah. Freya mentioned [The Traitor Baru Cormorant](#). So if you liked that book you will like this one. If you're into like, all of the Chinese dramas that we've been watching these...uh, last year or two — absolutely pick up this book. Because it's very much in that, like, Historical Chinese Drama kind of genre.

M: I, I, I... it is on my list to read — a) I don't have the ARC—

[A laughs]

M: As aforementioned. And b) I have been informed it will make me cry a bunch. And I am avoiding books that will make me cry for now.

F: It definitely gave me a book hangover.

A: Yeah.

[A + M laugh]

F: I don't tend to cry with books at all—

M: I do, see.

F: —but there are certain books that make me just sit on the couch like a stunned mallard for an hour or two.

[A laughs]

F: And then not be able to pick up another book for a week afterwards.

A: Right, because they're too powerful.

M: Well that is a delightful image of Freya. But perhaps we should— shall we talk about something that does the opposite for you?

F: Yes.

A: Yes please, Freya.

F: Let's do that.

[M laughs]

F: So, as I said at the beginning and surprising absolutely no one, I am the Romance One.

[M gasps dramatically]

A: Yay!

F: I know.

M: I'm going to swoon.

F: And this book that I'm going to attempt to sell to you... I think I have mentioned as a book that I have read on the podcast. But now I'm going to get a little bit deeper and try to tell you all the reasons why you have to read this. So this is [*The Duke Who Didn't*](#) by Courtney Milan. And Courtney Milan does write quite a few regency novels, and this is a male/female regency romance. Which takes the idea of a regency Duke romance—of which there are many—and says, 'Okay, but what if Chinese though?'

[Interested noises from M + A]

F: And so the two main characters in this are Jeremy Yu who is the Duke. And he is a Duke because his father—who is a very minor son of a noble family—went off to China, got married, had Jeremy, and then all the other male people in his family died in various wars or diseases. And someone had to come and be like, ‘Okay, but you know, now you are the Duke’. But by this stage the father dies, so this little boy—

M: Oh no!

F: —who is half Chinese gets taken back to England by his aunt. Father’s sister. Who is very invested in making him into a proper Duke.

A: Mhm.

M: Oh, the poor kid.

F: [laughs] And the other protagonist of this book is Chloe Fong. Who is also Chinese. And her backstory is that her— she came to England with her father, who was almost poached by a group of people who wanted him to make sauce for them.

[A + M giggle]

F: So he is an amazing chef.

A: Okay...?

[M descends into wheezing laughter]

A: Poached! He got poached?!

M: I will say that like— the dot points... dear listeners— oh god.

[A breathless laughing in background]

M: Dear listeners, the dot points include a note: ‘The idea of Englishness brackets in the form of sauce’.

F: I am *getting* to that!

M: I have been eyeballing, Freya! You can’t just do this to us! What about sauce?!

F: Okay. So backstory RE sauce. Chloe’s father— so her mother is dead, her father is essentially conned by a couple of white men, who say, ‘We want you to make this. We’ve tasted this amazing sauce you’ve made. Why don’t you go into business with us, and we will sell this

sauce, and you will be a partner in the profits.' Except then of course they screw him out of everything.

[A + M groan]

F: And take the formula for the sauce, and leave him penniless and alone in England with his young daughter.

M: Fuck the English!

F: Fuck the English.

M + A: Yeah.

F: And this is— well, the idea behind this book is that of 'who is actually English?' And who gets to be English. And what is English-ness. And it's set in a village called Wedgeford. It's gonna be the first in a series called The Wedgeford Trials. Which is very deliberately racially diverse. And it became a village because a couple of Chinese men settled there, and decided, 'Okay, look, there's almost nobody here, but this is where we are going to set up'. And it became known as a place where people who had, you know, come from overseas, didn't speak the language, not had luck in their employment or whatever, could come. And it's a place where nobody asks questions about where you are from, or what your backstory is. But everyone is accepted. And so it is a very very racially diverse small English village in the regency era.

[M hums]

F: And why I wrote down the idea of Englishness in the form of sauce—

[M wheezes]

F: —is that Chloe's one driving ambition in life is to get revenge for her father against these people who screwed him over. And so he has developed this new and even better sauce using a fermentation, and lots of techniques that he knew from his work in China. But using only ingredients that he can find in England.

[A hums with interest]

F: And so there's this long ongoing thread about like, she can't decide what to call the sauce that they're going to sell at this festival, and make a lot of money. And, you know, prove that he's a genius. And Chloe cannot decide what to call the sauce. And, you know, she doesn't want to call it a foreign sauce because it's actually an English sauce.

A: Mmm. Right.

F: And she's English—she sees herself as English. Because she grew up in England.

[A + M hum]

F: And so there's a lot of really interesting... uh, you know, discussions and things happening in the background of what is a relatively light-hearted romance, around the ideas of identity and racial identity in this historical context. It is a really lovely romance—and it's one that I don't usually find as interesting, which is childhood friends to lovers when they are basically already in love at the start of the story. So Jeremy is the Duke who owns the village of Wedgeford and has not told any of his friends in the village that he is the Duke who owns it.

M: Ah hah hah! Amazing.

F: And everybody is really relieved because the Duke doesn't seem to care— like never collects rent, and the only reason they've managed to thrive is because they're not having to pay rent.

[M is doing a full belly cackle]

A: Yeah.

F: And even though they don't own the land and the houses that they live in, they can basically act as though they do. So everybody goes around being like, 'Hah hah! Fuck the Duke! The Duke who didn't do anything!' And Jeremy, who goes there every year to take part in this festival, called the Wedgeford Trials, thinks of it as basically his home. Like he has all his friends there, he loves everyone there, he really loves Chloe. But he hasn't told anybody that he is the Duke. And he knows how terrible, you know, of a life his mother would have had being forced to be a duchess. And how terribly she was treated by society, and he's very aware of the microaggressions against him, despite the fact that he is technically a Duke. And well born. And how his very well meaning aunt is trying to erase everything that is not properly English about him, and trying to convince him to marry a white English woman—

M: Oh god.

F: —so that eventually the mistake that is his ethnicity will be erased from the family line.

A: Yeah yeah yeah.

F: So he turns up a few days before this festival where Chloe and her dad are going to sell this sauce and make their fortune. And he's got it in his head that like, he's realized that he doesn't want to marry anybody except Chloe. There is a cat on the screen. Hello, cat!

M: There is a very important cat. We're just going to have a brief *pause*.

A: Brief pause for cat.

M: Pause for the cat. The cat is very— the cat is being exceedingly agreeable and gentle, which is how you can tell there are no women nearby.

A: That's true, she's a violent misogynist.

[All three laughing]

A: Ugh, she's the worst. Respectful of gender identity though. She's got that going for her. Sorry, go ahead Freya.

M: Freya, please resume.

F: Yes, anyway — this is the romance between Chloe, who is a very serious listmaker, who cannot delegate and is extremely into everything being perfect.

M: Oh gosh.

F: And Jeremy, who as a self defense mechanism has learned to turn everything into a joke.

M: Great.

F: And he knows that if people are laughing at him, they might be slightly more likely to accept him into places and take him a bit seriously. And he is dead serious about Chloe, but cannot persuade her of this fact, because everything just comes out wrong.

A: I love that character... character trope. That archetype.

F: It's a wonderful like— journey that they go on. And as I said, it's a romance. You know where it's going. But Courtney Milan also manages to subvert some of the beats. Like, you think, 'Oh, there will be a dark moment coming up at around 75% mark' and you know it's to do with this secret that Jeremy is keeping, that he's convinced is going to ruin everything.

[M + A hum knowingly]

F: And the way Courtney Milan handles that is in a way a kind of... way of taking a step back and looking at the accepted beats and structure of romance, and saying, 'But it doesn't have to be like that'.

A: Yeah.

F: And you can still tell a satisfying romance in a different way. And like any good romance, it has really good tropes! It has seduction via lists—

[M breaks out laughing]

F: —it has Chloe's father putting huge amounts of chili powder into Jeremy's noodles, and then staring at him dead eyed while he eats it in pain.

[A + M cackling]

M: We love a dad!

F: And of course, it is a revenge story, and I love revenge stories. It also contains probably my favorite ever use of the [Only One Bed](#) trope.

[A gasps with flair]

F: Which is again—

A: Tell me *everything*.

F: Again, this is a book which has a lot to do with fate.

A: Yeah.

F: And Chloe is convinced— working through things, and she's trying to consider like, does she want to have a fling with Jeremy, does she want to sleep with him... she's like, 'Okay we are going to London to do this errand, and we have to stay at an inn. And if fate wants us to sleep together, there will only be the one room left'.

[A laughing with delighted gusto]

F: And so like, she has made this bargain with herself. She's all into like, lists and bargains.

A [breathes deep]: Ah! Yes!

F: And so she's told herself— she has this discussion with Jeremy. She says, 'Okay, so this is how it works. If there's only one bed, we will share the bed'. And then they get to the inn...

A [in a tone that is very much on the edge of their seat]: Uh HUH!

F: And first of all, they are told that there are no beds, because they are two Chinese people. And then Jeremy Dukes at them for a while.

A: Sure! Love the use of the verb 'to Duke'.

F: And then they're all, 'Oh! Oh! I was mistaken, we actually have four rooms available.' And Chloe goes, 'Actually, you know what, sometimes you have to make your own fate'.

A: AHHHHH!

F: And steps up to the counter, and says, 'Sir, I believe you are mistaken. I think you'll find you only have one bed.'

[M + A burst out in joyous laughter]

F: And the poor innkeeper is all, 'Um, um... Yes? Because the one we have left is the best of the four that we have. But we only have... one.' So she basically says fuck fate, I am going to make it that there is only one bed. And Jeremy's like... oh my god, oh my god, oh my god.

[M + A still losing their minds in the background]

A: That's *incredible*.

M: I love her!

F: It's a perfect scene. I feel like I can spoil it for you, because like, knowing it's coming does not diminish the joy of it.

M: No! Right, right.

A: Oh, that's amazing.

F: So yes, this is a flawless romance novel. Courtney Milan's writing is very easy to read, it's clever, it's bubbly, and it digs into these deep themes. And it makes you care SO hard about these characters. And before I finish, I just wanted to—as Macey did—make a bit of a nod to some of the other great writers of color who are working in this particular genre at the moment. I know I have mentioned books by all of them in our years of podcasting—

[A + M make noises of agreement]

M: It really has been years.

F: —but in particular, Alyssa Cole. Alyssa Cole writes both civil war era spy romances—

A: Ooh!

F: —with African American protagonists, and also a series about modern African royals, which I absolutely love. I love her [Reluctant Royals](#) and [Runaway Royals](#) series. [Alisha Rai](#) writes a lot

of interracial romances where neither person is white, which is actually quite uncommon in the romance space.

A: Mhm.

F: And she writes books that are very clever about the use of social media and the impact that social media has in today's society. And she also writes *incredible* complex family dynamics. So if you want really good family feelings, Alisha Rai. I think I'll leave it there for those two. They're two favourites.

M: Well, dear listeners. There are some books!

A: There are some books! There are some books!

F: There are many books!

A: There are some good books. Too powerful! I think with all three of these, we can like, tl;dr — too powerful. Too too powerful.

M: Too powerful.

A: Too talented, amazing. So thank you so much for joining us, and we will leave it at that. 'Cause this episode is running a little bit long. We love you, goodbye!

F + M: Goodbye!

[01:01:03]

[Outro music plays]

A: Hey everybody. Thanks for joining us on this episode of Be the Serpent, a podcast of extremely, extremely deep literary merit. Now, I know what you may be wondering: 'Wait a second, Alex, didn't you do the outro for the last episode? And now you're doing it for this episode? And presumably for the next episode?' Yes. But then we will be back on track after that. You know the old adage: it never rains, but it pours? That, but for all three of your Slurpents all at once, like, for like, the last two months solid. There have been just way, way too many things. But your American Slurpent has had the fewest Things going on, and so your American Slurpent is nobly, honorably martyring themselves by graciously doing three outros in a row. I know you must miss Freya and Macey's dulcet tones—well, probably not that much, actually, since you literally just heard them on the actual episode, but nevermind. Anyway, we'll be back on track soon.

A: Anyway, we have some exciting topics to talk about in upcoming episodes. On the next episode two weeks hence, on March 24th, which is a fake date made up by the government to

trick us and lie to us, we will be discussing Girl Gangs. Gangs of girls. If you want to prepare in advance, one of the tentpoles for that episode is the novella [*Ring Shout*](#) by P. Djèlí Clark. So if you know anyone who loves that trope, give them a heads up! Word of mouth is the only way that people find out about us.

A: If you enjoy the podcast, please consider supporting us on Patreon at patreon.com/serpentcast, or leaving a review on iTunes. Questions, comments, breathless adulations? Contact us at serpentcast@gmail.com, or @serpentcast on Twitter and Tumblr. And by the way, your eyebrows are looking especially cute today. Just thought I'd let you know!

[01:02:47]

What We're Into Lately

[*Seven of Infinities*](#) by Aliette de Bodard
[*Fireheart Tiger*](#) by Aliette de Bodard
[*The Jasmine Throne*](#) by Tasha Suri
[*The Queer Principles of Kit Webb*](#) by Cat Sebastian
[*A Spindle Splintered*](#) by Alix E. Harrow
[*The Name of All Things*](#) by Jenn Lyons
[thepartyresponsible's Batman-Avengers crossover fic](#)
[*Do Every Stupid Thing*](#) by thepartyresponsible
[*Star Daughter*](#) by Shveta Thakrar
[*Elatsoe*](#) by Darcie Little Badger
[*Raybearer*](#) by Jordan Ifueko
[*Bridgerton*](#)
[*Cherry Magic! Thirty Years of Virginity Can Make You a Wizard?!*](#)
[*The Sleuth of the Ming Dynasty*](#)
[*Invitation to Wine*](#) (将进酒) by Tang Jiu Qing 唐酒卿 (Mandarin)

Other Stuff We Mentioned

[Be the Serpent Episode 71: Back To School \(feat. Naomi Novik\)](#)
[Be the Serpent Episode 72: Fangs for the Memories](#)
A Deadly Education by Naomi Novik
[*Trail of Lightning*](#) by Rebecca Roanhorse
[*Spider-Man: Into the Spider-verse*](#)
[*The Saddle Club*](#)
[*Gossip Girl*](#)
[*The Belles*](#) by Dhonielle Clayton
Wild Beauty Anna-Marie McLemore
[*She Who Became the Sun*](#) by Shelley Parker-Chan
[*The Traitor Baru Cormorant*](#) by Seth Dickinson
[*The Duke Who Didn't*](#) by Courtney Milan

The infamous [Only One Bed](#) trope
[Reluctant Royals](#) series by Alyssa Cole
[Runaway Royals](#) series by Alyssa Cole
Books by [Alisha Rai](#)

For Next Time

[Ring Shout](#) by P. Djèlí Clark

Episode Content Warnings

The Duke Who Didn't concerns protagonists encountering racism (both ambient and direct).

She Who Became The Sun interrogates gender essentialist prejudice accurate to its historical setting.

Raybearer deals with themes of child abuse/neglect.