

# Appendix Season, Episode 1: Sentimentality, Revisited

## SPEAKERS

Marcelle Kosman, Hannah McGregor

*(Witch, Please Theme Music plays) (Dance of the Priestesses by Victor Herbert Orchestra)*

**Hannah McGregor** 00:10

Hello and welcome to Witch, Please, a fortnightly podcast about the Harry Potter world. I'm Hannah McGregor.

**Marcelle Kosman** 00:16

And I'm Marcelle Kosman. And I have no idea what I'm doing here. I thought we were done reading the Harry Potter books again.

**Hannah McGregor** 00:28

*[laughs]* That's a really great point, Marcelle. And I think we should talk about it in the sorting chat.

**Marcelle Kosman** 00:34

What a good idea. Let's do that.

**Hannah McGregor** 00:36

So for those of you who may have missed our very exciting Witch, Please Tell Me Team Edition, we're doing an eighth season. And this is it. Welcome. You're here.

**Marcelle Kosman** 00:49

*[laughs]* It's already happened.

**Hannah McGregor** 00:50

Marcelle, what's an appendix?

**Marcelle Kosman** 00:53

An appendix is an organ that we don't really have a clear sense of what it does. But we think it's part of the immune system. But for whatever reason, it tends to get inflamed, and then it needs to be removed.

**Hannah McGregor** 01:05

It kind of looks like a little finger.

**Marcelle Kosman** 01:07

It does, it looks like a little hooky finger.

**Hannah McGregor** 01:09

What else is an appendix?

**Marcelle Kosman** 01:10

An appendix is also in a book, it's where you put the stuff that you want to include, but that didn't really fit in the book itself. And so in, for example, a research project like a monograph or a dissertation, you might have an appendix at the end, where you've got a bunch of really cool research stuff that you found that you think is worthy of inclusion, but that didn't, you know, fit with the bigger argument. So ergo, Hannah, what's this?

**Hannah McGregor** 01:42

*[laughs]* This is the season of episodes that we couldn't quite figure out how to fit into the regular structure of our seasons, which focus on a particular book, but that we still think are cool and wanted to talk about. So the episodes of this season are going to take a sort of larger top down approach of the Harry Potter series as a whole. And because it's big ideas that we think are cool, there's gonna be probably a higher percentage of guest episodes.

**Marcelle Kosman** 02:17

We love guest episodes.

**Hannah McGregor** 02:19

We love guest episodes. And we have an amazing document full of pitches that we have really wanted to sort of start dipping into. So we'll be doing that starting with our next episode, and bringing in some really exciting people who are going to teach us things.

**Marcelle Kosman** 02:37

God, I love to learn. *[Soundbite of crowd cheering]*

**Hannah McGregor** 02:43

The other thing I think is worth noting is that all the anxious questions we got about what's going to happen after season seven, are now just going to be what's going to happen after you're done with the appendix season.

**Marcelle Kosman** 02:55

So don't stop worrying. **[laughs]** I'm just kidding. You can stop worrying. We'll take care of you. Don't worry.

**Hannah McGregor** 03:02

Yeah, yeah, we got this. In what way do we got this, Marcelle?

**Marcelle Kosman** 03:05

Mommy and daddy are here, I guess is what I'm saying. **[laughs]**

**Hannah McGregor** 03:09

I'm Daddy.

**Marcelle Kosman** 03:10

I'm Mommy. **[laughs]** So what we're doing is throughout the appendix season, because we have so many wonderful guests coming on, that's going to free up a little bit of our time so that we can start testing out some new podcast pilots. So we're going to be releasing these sort of, I keep wanting to say test run pilots as though that's not what a pilot is. **[Hannah laughs]** They're like promise rings or engagement rings, you know?

**Hannah McGregor** 03:40

Yeah, they're promise ring episodes, we're making promise ring episodes.

**Marcelle Kosman** 03:45

**[laughs]** And so we'll be releasing those to the Patreon and asking our Patreon supporters for feedback and giving them a little bit of an opportunity to help steer the direction of where we're going. So not to jump ahead to the credits, but if you want to participate in that process, it's not too late for you to join the Patreon

**Hannah McGregor** 04:09

And finally have an opportunity to tell us what to do. We normally respond very badly to.

**Marcelle Kosman** 04:15

Very, very poorly. **[laughs]** Almost aggressively. **[both laugh]**  
Coach knows. She has to be so gentle when she needs us to do something differently.

**Hannah McGregor** 04:29

Fuck you, you're not my mom!

**Marcelle Kosman** 04:32

*[laughs]* Marcelle's my mom! And so on. *[Hannah laughs]*

*(Witch, Please Theme Music plays)*

If we're going to be talking about the series as a whole, we should probably refresh ourselves on some key details in Revision.

**Hannah McGregor** 04:58

Okay, Marcelle, so remember when I said that in our first episode on sentimentality that the Harry Potter books are often figured as a series that makes readers more compassionate and empathetic? And then we agreed to save that discussion for the appendix season?

**Marcelle Kosman** 05:14

I do. I do remember that.

**Hannah McGregor** 05:17

Yeah. Well, we're here now. And that's what we're gonna do.

**Marcelle Kosman** 05:21

*[laughs]* I didn't prepare.

**Hannah McGregor** 05:23

*[laughs]* But first, I want to briefly summarize what we're talking about when we talk about sentimentality.

**Marcelle Kosman** 05:29

I think that's a good idea. You are a little bit of an expert. You wrote the book on sentimentality.

**Hannah McGregor** 05:37

I wrote *a* book on sentimentality.

**Marcelle Kosman** 05:40

The only one that *I've* read.

**Hannah McGregor** 05:41

Great, I'm an expert. So, sentimentality was an 18th century philosophical movement that pushed back against rationality, which itself was a response to, you know, the

dominance of the church. So like, you know, has had its value, I guess. But sentimentality pushed back against rationality in favor of valuing heightened feeling and earnestness. Earnest feeling.

**Marcelle Kosman** 06:07

Mm hmm. Earnest is the thing that we are famously not good at.

**Hannah McGregor** 06:12

We're so bad. We're so bad. **[laughs]** Okay, it was also a literary movement. And as a literary movement, sentimental novels had a set of recognizable tropes, like humanizing others through the terms of white civility by depicting marginalized others as loving children and having the capacity for suffering. So we talked about *Uncle Tom's Cabin* being a real sort of major example of that, but we also see it in *Little Women* where, as part of their moral education, the March girls give their Christmas breakfast away to a sad, possibly German family.

**Marcelle Kosman** 06:53

Mhm. Dying is important, right?

**Hannah McGregor** 06:56

**[laughs]** Absolutely important for somebody to die. Yeah, the ideal sentimental heroine is always sort of the Beth of the family, right? Like, the most sentimental heroine is the one who is too pure for this world, and so must simply die.

**Marcelle Kosman** 07:12

Mm hmm. So that we can learn.

**Hannah McGregor** 07:16

Yeah, absolutely. Cool. What a bummer. And that learning is a real key part of the sentimental novel as well, because it shows sort of our protagonist maturing from being excessively impressible to being self managed.

**Marcelle Kosman** 07:31

We talked about impressible. I remember that.

**Hannah McGregor** 07:35

Yeah, yeah. It's a term that I learned from scholar Kyla Schuller, who explains that *impressibility* was this 19th century pseudo scientific concept about the idea that some humans have a greater capacity to evolve or change than others. And obviously,

because 19th century pseudosciences are deeply enmeshed in white supremacy, the people who have the greater capacity to evolve and change are white people.

So compressibility, according to this sort of, you know, 19th century understanding was linked to white people's capacity to grow ever more civilized, but it also posed this risk, which is like, if you're too easily impressed upon. If you're too malleable, then you're potentially too vulnerable to outside influences. Right? You go and spend time with this poor German family? What if you accidentally become poor and German?

**Marcelle Kosman** 08:33

That's why it's okay to give them your Christmas breakfast, but not to eat with them.

**Hannah McGregor** 08:38

Yeah. And don't invite them to live in your home, or consider them to be a community. Leave immediately afterwards. So sentimentalism emerged as a means of managing this excess impressibility in part by attributing it to women as like, the feeling sex, the sex that does feeling.

**Marcelle Kosman** 08:58

If you need to make something manageable, you just assign it to women, and then you can control it.

**Hannah McGregor** 09:05

Yeah. So that sense that feeling strongly was women's job. And then, you know, alongside this, this emerging sentimental novel, lead to this understanding of reading as a potentially morally improving activity for women. If they were reading the right kinds of books, of course, because we're impressible. So if we read good books, they make us good. But if we read bad books, they make us bad.

**Marcelle Kosman** 09:32

of course. And so all of this led us to have our conversation about whether or not literature can actually change people for the better or the worse, right?

**Hannah McGregor** 09:45

Yeah, yeah. Because if we actually dig down and are like, Oh, no, this idea that reading makes you better or worse is rooted in this bonkers pseudo-science. Then we need to apply some pressure to this idea that reading fiction can be morally improving, because that is an idea that really continues to circulate, including through anti-racist reading lists and the sort of generally overdetermined idea of important books or books that can change the world.

**Marcelle Kosman** 10:16

Okay, but Hannah, can they though?

**Hannah McGregor** 10:19

Marcelle, that's exactly what I want to talk about today.

**Marcelle Kosman** 10:22

Oh, goody.

***(Witch, Please Theme Music plays)***

**Hannah McGregor** 10:32

Now that we've really grounded ourselves in sentimentality, let's expand our understanding a little more in transfiguration class. So Marcelle, I want us to take a closer look at how the Harry Potter series in general has been positioned as improving. And to do that, I'm going to draw quite a bit here on a book by Beth Driscoll called *The New Literary Middlebrow*.

**Marcelle Kosman** 10:59

Okay, hold on. This is an episode about sentimentality. In fact, this is the follow up episode about sentimentality. What are you doing bringing in the middle brow, Hannah?

**Hannah McGregor** 11:12

Ah, I'm rude. So the middlebrow and the sentimental, not quite the same, but very closely related. So let me explain the middle ground.

**Marcelle Kosman** 11:23

Wait, wait, wait, you know what I think you should do first. Can you explain brows?

**Hannah McGregor** 11:29

Yeah, absolutely. So the concept of brows, so high brow, middle brow, lowbrow is a way of categorizing kinds of culture and the way that we engage with them, and its origins lie in another very popular historical pseudo science.

**Marcelle Kosman** 11:51

Is it phrenology?

**Hannah McGregor** 11:53

It's phrenology, thank you Marcelle. It was like what the fuck is it called though? It's the head measuring one, you know, the one that for a brief period of time, if you went into Urban Outfitters, you could get like a cool model of a human head with like, all the parts, all the parts labeled? Guys, that's the most racist thing to own. I mean, not the most racist thing to own but like, it's a real eugenicist nightmare. And if you've got one lying around your home as a cute will sort of tchotchke, you should really get rid of it because phrenology is fucking grim.

So phrenology was this idea that you could tell things about people by measuring their heads. Like you know, he's got a real criminal forehead. And there began to be the sort of head shapes that were associated with classes. So high brow was literally like, rich people had high foreheads. And low brow was like poor people had low sloping foreheads.

**Marcelle Kosman** 13:05

To be clear, this is what people said, not the trend that was emerging in skull shapes.

**Hannah McGregor** 13:12

No, because you can't make your skull shape a trend.

**Marcelle Kosman** 13:16

What? No.

**Hannah McGregor** 13:18

It's not how skulls work!

**Marcelle Kosman** 13:20

No, I know. I know. I'm just trying to clarify the phrasing.

**Hannah McGregor** 13:25

Marcelle is modeling a skill you learn when you spend a lot of time teaching first year English, which is that people are sort of half paying attention and making notes and you're explaining to them a bad racist thing people used to think, and they forget to take the note, "this was bad, racist and wrong". And so then when they're writing their exam, they're just genuinely explaining to you how phrenology works. And you're like, oh, no.

**Marcelle Kosman** 13:48

"Because in the 18th century, a lot of very unintelligent people had low sloped foreheads," and you're like... no! That's not what I said!



**Hannah McGregor** 13:56

No! [*Marcelle laughs*] Okay, so the middlebrow sort of came along after the highbrow and the lowbrow as concepts. And it was, you know, associated with the middle classes, of course, but it was really a particular way of consuming culture that was really about the sort of aspirational middle class consuming culture that they hoped would make them better. Consuming culture that they thought would be improving. And a lot of the time, the culture that sort of emerged for this middlebrow consumer was culture that had sort of a smattering of the appeal of the highbrow, but had been tempered a little bit to have some more populist appeal.

So for example, Broadway musicals are a middlebrow art form that emerged in response to the understanding that going to the opera, or the ballet, is a highbrow thing to do. But the middle classes didn't want to because they were bored. And so we get Broadway musicals emerging which are still, you know, they're not a populist form, because it's expensive to go to a musical, right? It's still a sort of sign of prestige that you can afford to go and see live theater, but it's live theater that's been tempered to be entertaining for the many.

**Marcelle Kosman** 15:25

It's like fun and you learn the songs and maybe you can sing along in the audience or whatever.

**Hannah McGregor** 15:29

And ideally, it also contains a moral or political lesson like Hamilton. Yeah, the ideal middlebrow art form. So middlebrow is not the same as sentimental. But a lot of those texts that circulated in a middlebrow way for middlebrow readers were sentimental texts, because they really fit that category of being, you know, entertaining, but also improving in some way, like book club friendly novels or prestige television dramas, you know, can have really sentimental content, but also can be circulated as middlebrow as in ideal for the middlebrow consumer.

The other really key thing about how middlebrow texts circulate is that they're highly mediated, because this idea that they're going to make you better in some way, relies on this external mediator, who can say, Hey, everybody, you should read this, or you should watch this, or you should go to this because it's good. It's the thing that's going to improve you.

**Marcelle Kosman** 16:33

I mean, like Canadareads, it's the book that will shape the nation or whatever.

**Hannah McGregor 16:40**

Yeah, yeah, Canadareads, which is a Canadian version of the sort of one book one country reading challenges that exist all over the place, will often have a theme that's like, "the one book that will change the world". And then, you know, when you watch the panelists talk about the books they really are talking about, like what's a book that will be entertaining enough that lots of people will read it, and it won't make them feel too bad, but it will also contain an important lesson?

Yeah, so we can really see the sort of blending of the sentimental and the middle brow, at work and in these ideas, alongside things like literary festivals, or best of lists or literary prizes, are all sorts of these, these middlebrow mediating forces. So, Beth Driscoll also identifies a number of other characteristics of the middlebrow, the new literary middlebrow in particular, she says "it's middle class, reverential, commercial feminized, emotional, recreational and earnest".

**Marcelle Kosman 17:42**

Hannah, I have a question. Can a book that doesn't start out middlebrow become middlebrow? Let me give you an example. In 2004, Oprah Winfrey added *100 Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez to Oprah's book club. I remember this because my extremely snobby neighbor was with me in a bookstore, saw Oprah's book club sticker on the book and said, Oh, Oprah's reading good books now. And I will never forget this until the day that I die. **[Marcelle and Hannah laugh]** Lots of loaded stuff in there, speaking of class.

So my question is, when Oprah Winfrey added *100 Years of Solitude* to the book club, did the novel then cease to be avant garde and become recreational? Or do the novel's qualities make it a candidate for middlebrowing in a way that maybe some novels no matter how much the famous book club leading reader enjoyed it, I don't know how I started that sentence, but like had qualities that no matter how much they enjoyed it, wouldn't become popular.

**Hannah McGregor 18:59**

Yeah. Such a good question. So middlebrowness is not an inherent quality of a text. It is about how it is circulated, how it is mediated, how it is consumed. So what we saw in that season of Oprah's book club, where she started taking classics and rebranding them as Oprah's book club picks was the attempted middlebrowification of a number of novels, some of which didn't take well to the process. The one I always think about that was the big flop was *Anna Karenina*, which she really tried. And people were like, Yes, I will buy it. And then they got like, ten pages in and were like, what, what the Russian nonsense is this?

**Marcelle Kosman** 19:43

Do you know what, I read the whole thing and was like, that's the ending. The ending is women are crazy? Are you fucking kidding me?

**Hannah McGregor** 19:52

My favorite thing about *Anna Karenina* is that there's a whole other plot about a Marxist farmer, that just nobody ever talks about. **[Marcelle laughs]** They just talk about like, ah, star crossed lovers and it's like more importantly, this guy who's trying to figure out whether he can run a farm in which he treats his laborers like humans.

**Marcelle Kosman** 20:09

I don't even remember that. Maybe that didn't make it into the version I read. I read the abridged version.

**Hannah McGregor** 20:17

So novels like *100 Years of Solitude* and *Anna Karenina* are not sentimental novels. I mean, and that's not a judgment call one way or the other. That's just not the genre that they're operating in. They come out of very different international literary traditions that have their own sort of particular origins and histories. And Oprah bringing them into her book club is an attempt to make them middlebrow. I think it is, in general, easier to sell sentimental novels as middlebrow because the sentimental and the middlebrow matchup well in so many ways. And so it's not that sentimental things are inherently middlebrow or middlebrow things become sentimental. It's just that they are chocolate and peanut butter.

**Marcelle Kosman** 21:00

That's different from what I was thinking but okay, yeah, sure.

**Hannah McGregor** 21:05

Two great tastes that taste great together.

**Marcelle Kosman** 21:07

Yeah. And for some people it is a nightmare of an allergic reaction. **[laughs]**

**Hannah McGregor** 21:12

Exactly.

**Marcelle Kosman** 21:13

I love it. That's great. Okay, okay.

**Hannah McGregor** 21:16

So, sentimentality, like I was saying, is generally a characteristic of the culture itself. So when I'm talking about a sentimental novel, I'm talking about a novel that has sentimental tropes or characteristics to it. And that, again, is that like, heightened attention to feeling, it's feminized, it's emotional, it's earnest, all things that Driscoll describes as being middlebrow as well, which is again, why they align so well. So the middlebrow is a form of mediation that we can observe in cultural industries. Sentimentality is an aesthetic and generic quality.

**Marcelle Kosman** 21:50

I see. Okay, that is a clear and helpful distinction.

**Hannah McGregor** 21:54

So we've already talked about the fact that the Harry Potter books contain sentimental tropes right? We've seen those tropes at work. So unsurprisingly, it has also been a good candidate for middlebrow recirculation, and that middlebrow circulation is the subject of an entire case study in Driscoll's book.

**Marcelle Kosman** 22:15

Oh, well, that's handy.

**Hannah McGregor** 22:17

So handy. What Driscoll is interested in, again, is the way that books are not inherently middlebrow, but rather are mediated in a way that positions them as middlebrow. So she's looking at the mediators, and in the case of Harry Potter, she's talking about educators and reviewers, the way they're mediating the Harry Potter books. She calls educators and reviewers professional valuers, that is people who have the cultural capital to declare something important or not important.

Which I think it's worth pausing to note here that as professors who make a podcast, we are 100% professional valuers. Undeniably, that is what we are doing right now is we are remediating this book series in a way that makes it interesting or amenable to a particular kind of reader or listener.

**Marcelle Kosman** 23:13

If I could unclench any part of my body right now, I would be able to.

**Hannah McGregor** 23:18

Podcasts are a deeply middlebrow medium.

**Marcelle Kosman** 23:21

Oh, yeah, no, that's, that's not surprising. No, the thing that's making me all clench up is the idea of making the Harry Potter series interesting anew. I am uncomfortable with that role.

**Hannah McGregor** 23:37

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. Okay. So I'm gonna focus really on the educational context here, because it's what I think is really interesting. So in the educational context, Harry Potter is valued, often for encouraging literacy. But when people say that a book encourages literacy, they're often quite vague about what they actually mean by that, because literacy is a murky concept that we talk about a lot, but are unclear on how to measure. It ranges from the ability to read for comprehension to the encouragement of reading for pleasure, and of course, for ethical improvement. So teaching literacy, while sometimes it's about teaching to a standardized test, so that you can prove that your students are functionally literate, teaching literacy is often framed by educators as teaching students how to read the right kinds of things in the right kinds of ways.

Right? Getting students into reading for pleasure into reading recreationally, which again, was one of those middlebrow understandings of reading, so literacy becomes not just oh, I can read as much as I need to in order to do a job. Literacy becomes you or somebody who reads for pleasure, right? And we see the sort of understanding of literacy always lurking around studies that say oh, people are reading fewer books than ever. Right? Which isn't saying that literacy rates are dropping in a functional way. It's saying that people are spending their recreational time doing other things. And the implication is always that it's bad-

**Marcelle Kosman** 25:12

Or that like if it includes reading, it's not real reading-

**Hannah McGregor** 25:15

Surfing the web is always a different category than reading a book.

**Marcelle Kosman** 25:18

Right, tumblr is not the same as reading a book. Twitter is not the same as a book.

**Hannah McGregor** 25:22

Yeah, exactly. Because you need to be reading the right kinds of things, i.e. long form fiction in the right kinds of ways, i.e. for pleasure. So here's a quote from Driscoll. She writes "in media reports *Harry Potter* is often credited with boosting literacy. However,

the lack of a commonly accepted definition of literacy means that the term can be used vaguely with claims about the novel's effects couched in the language of enchantment," end quote. So educators often claim that *Harry Potter* boosts literacy because children find the books entertaining. Kids like them. So they read them, they read them voluntarily. Literacy boosted. Did it.

**Marcelle Kosman** 25:02

Checks all the boxes.

**Hannah McGregor** 25:03

So as popular novels, the *Harry Potter* books aren't generally used to teach literacy in terms of like those standardized testable skills. Right, it's the reading for pleasure thing. So again, to quote Driscoll, she writes, "some reading for pleasure advocates act from the belief that reading per se is beneficial, and that when reading is enjoyable, students will do more of it. *Harry Potter* texts are exemplary in this context, as they're often credited with inspiring more reading." End quote.

So at the heart of that understanding is reading is beneficial, per se. So in and of itself, if reading, not literacy, but reading for fun, is beneficial in and of itself, why? Some of the claims educators make is that it improves us by teaching us about ourselves. Right? So like giving us a vocabulary to understand our internal lives or to talk about going through struggles. So they'll talk about, you know, Harry has struggles and helps the students put language to experiences maybe they have also had. It teaches us about others. So the books give us a sort of representation of difference.

**Marcelle Kosman** 27:15

Very helpfully provides us with some analogies so that we can understand racism without actually having to confront racism.

**Hannah McGregor** 27:25

It teaches us about the world, social issues, politics, care for others, right? These are all things that I think, as literary educators are probably familiar with as claims about things that reading does. So middlebrow, reading approaches often claim essentially that novels can be used by readers as the sort of frameworks to think through our own experiences, particularly our own moral and ethical dilemmas. So that thus the act of reading becomes, and these are Driscoll's words, "personally transformative." you're wincing.

**Marcelle Kosman** 28:06

Here's what's happening inside my body right now. There's this part of me that's like, isn't it though? **[laughs]** There's this part of me who has been indoctrinated into this ideology, who's like, but isn't it though?

**Hannah McGregor** 28:19

Not just indoctrinated. There's a part of you who is somebody who has loved books deeply and personally experienced the fact that they have changed you. You know its true because it happened to you.

**Marcelle Kosman** 28:31

That's me! **[laughs]** And then there's another part of me that's screaming like, but that doesn't mean that reading is bad, which I know rationally is not what you are saying. And I know that it's not what Driscoll I is saying.

**Hannah McGregor** 28:43

Beth Driscoll and I, two professors of literary history-

**Marcelle Kosman** 28:47

-Who think reading-

**Hannah McGregor** 28:49

Are here to tell you, stop reading books.

**Marcelle Kosman** 28:51

I know. I have a lot of knee jerking happening right now that I'm trying really hard to control. And I suspect that probably there are lots of listeners who are also like, knee jerking, and trying to control that impetus to hear where this goes because I don't think any of us believe in our hearts that at the end of the segment, you Hannah are gonna say so surprise, reading actually makes everybody bad. **[both laugh]** So that's why I'm wincing instead of being like, but it is. **[laughs]** So on behalf of all of the clenched up, listeners, Hannah, please go on.

**Hannah McGregor** 29:32

Oh, sorry, I'm not gonna really help you unclench unfortunately. So this premise that reading can be personally transformative assumes that when we read we identify with the characters and thus learn from their struggles. So there's a lot of stuff bound up in that and that belief in identification as one of the primary modes of reading, in order to lead to personal transformation, in order to lead to improvement is a big part of why sort of organizing around the diversification of books and authors has been much more powerful around children's writing than adult writing. Because there is such a strong

belief in the moral and ethical value of being able to identify with the protagonist in the book that you are reading. So that ends up drawing a fairly straight line to like, well, we have to make sure that all children have protagonists that they can identify with in the books that they are reading.

**Marcelle Kosman** 30:33

Also, maybe a similar call to have white kids reading books where the protagonist is not white so that they learn how to identify with non white people.

**Hannah McGregor** 30:44

Absolutely, it becomes part of an anti-racist education, for sure. So what is fundamentally unclear in these sort of defenses of reading that's personally transformative, is whether identifying with the characters in books is something that we somehow innately do, or as a middlebrow reading practice that we are taught.

**Marcelle Kosman** 31:07

Oh, my god, I can't wait for the next segment.

**Hannah McGregor** 31:11

By educators who think that's what good reading looks like. It's also unclear if this imaginative identification with fictional characters actually has any impact on our behavior in the world. And sort of the subtext of believing that there's an inherent value in reading makes us more moral, more empathetic, more, something good, self aware. But that is really hard to test.

**Marcelle Kosman** 31:45

I think we touched on this, I don't remember if it made it into the previous episode or not. But if you look at the literacy rates of-

**Hannah McGregor** 31:56

Yeah, like, look at the cultures where this particular kind of recreational reading is the most popular, those are generally the most imperialist countries.

**Marcelle Kosman** 32:08

Those are the countries that are like, you there, must be more like me against your will.

**Hannah McGregor** 32:13

Yes. And often use reading as part of the process of imperial expansion. Yeah. That, like the sort of, you know, imperial re-education of your colonies involves insisting that the children there read the right kinds of books in the right kinds of ways.



**Marcelle Kosman** 32:26

That's right. Yeah.

**Hannah McGregor** 32:28

So the sense that reading in general is good, but that reading certain books is better because certain books are better for moral education, that's textbook middlebrow culture. But it is also deeply sentimental, since that sort of model of moral education is like a major trope of what happens in sentimental novels. So we get these characters maturing and growing up in a way that parallels the ideal development of the reader.

**Marcelle Kosman** 32:58

So where the middlebrow and sentimental overlap, we also see the assumed inherent goodness of reading overlapping as well.

**Hannah McGregor** 33:11

Of reading certain kinds of books, in certain kinds of ways. You need to read them recreationally, right, as in you need to have sort of opted into it. It doesn't matter if you're doing it in a university class. And you need to read it earnestly, which is part of why I find watching Canada Reads unbearable. Absolutely unbearable, because they are also God damn earnest. **[Marcelle laughs]**

So Marcelle, I've talked around *Harry Potter* a lot, but I think we should probably get a little further into what exactly it is about Harry Potter that apparently makes us all better people.

**Marcelle Kosman** 33:53

Okay, I think I'm ready.

**(Witch, Please Theme Music plays)**

it's time to put our *reading-*

Eh?

Our *sentimental* reading and our educational reading- Eh? No? Hannah is shaking her head, no. To the test in OWL's! **[Soundbite of an owl hooting]** The segment where we apply our new critical lens to the whole goddamn series.

**Hannah McGregor** 34:23

Marcelle, let's just start off with a conversation. So what's wrong with the idea that reading a particular book makes us better or worse?

**Marcelle Kosman** 34:32

Okay, so the thing that's wrong about it is that there are countless ways that you can read and interpret a text. And so at its core, the idea that reading a book will- not can- but *will* make you better or worse, presumes falsely, that everyone reads and interprets a single text in the same way. We know that's wrong. You can't study literature and think that that is true without being fundamentally at odds with the process of interpreting literature. Like-

**Hannah McGregor** 35:13

I mean, there's nothing in the world that convinces you that that is false more quickly than teaching a novel to a roomful of students. That you're like, here you go, here's this novel that I'm pretty sure we're all gonna get the same thing out of, and then people start talking about what they read. And you're like, wait, what? Sorry, did we read the same book?

**Marcelle Kosman** 35:30

*[laughs]* What do you mean? I don't understand! Those two are gay? What? They're just friends!

**Hannah McGregor** 35:35

Just gal pals! God. So part of the challenge is the idea that like plug book into person get particular output. We're like, Okay, well, that's not how that's not how people work.

**Marcelle Kosman** 35:49

I wrote my whole dissertation about the fact that white supremacist women were writing early feminist fantasy fiction as a means of circulating white supremacist feminism. And so I do believe that literature can and does circulate ideas. Undeniably it must, right?

**Hannah McGregor** 36:18

But we know for sure that people learn things from books. We can test that one. We're very good at testing that one.

**Marcelle Kosman** 35:49

*[laughs]* How deep does the rabbit hole go, Hannah? *[laughs]*

**Hannah McGregor** 36:29

Yeah, no, yeah, no, no fair. Fair, made you question everything you believe, people can definitely learn things from books. You get an entire generation of people who read books that make, let's say, like, some spurious claims about the history of the country

that they're from, and those claims are reinforced again and again and again. And now everybody thinks that's true. Because they read it a bunch.

**Marcelle Kosman** 36:57

Okay, so coming back to *Harry Potter*, the entire generation of us who read and loved the books, like we all continue to have, irrespective of our critical relationships to the books, we continue to have feelings attached to things like what house we're in, or-

**Hannah McGregor** 37:19

Houses are exactly the thing I was thinking of, like, all of us who read *Harry Potter* have a set of shared vocabularies that have shared meanings. So we've got a whole generation of people for whom the word Ravenclaw is real, and means a bunch of stuff. And that, in part, comes out of the books themselves, because the books contain information.

**Marcelle Kosman** 37:44

*[laughs]* What? They do.

**Hannah McGregor** 37:46

And part of that, of course, emerges from the reading communities that formed around the book and the way that we have collectively interacted. So not all of the meaning of Ravenclaw comes out of the books, a lot of the meaning comes out of communities of reading, and our interactions with one another.

**Marcelle Kosman** 38:06

And that makes sense because of how limited our understanding of the other houses are. Right? Like, it is very difficult for me to imagine somebody in a vacuum reading the **Harry Potter** books and being like, yes, Slytherin. That's me. But, so many people identify as Slytherin and with really compelling and fun reasons. It's not because they believe in fascism.

**Hannah McGregor** 38:36

I mean, you've got something really key right there, which is that we don't read in a vacuum. We don't read in a vacuum like Sure. Let's try to do a test. Where we figure out if somebody who is raised in total isolation, handed the *Harry Potter* books, extracts some moral lesson from them, literally untestable. You can't. There's no way of knowing if that's the case. And that ties into the difficulty we have distinguishing between what I get out of the books versus what I get out of the community that emerged around the books?

How much of this actually comes from the texts in and of themselves and how much of it comes from the way that the texts circulate? And the way that, you know, like, I didn't have particularly strong feelings about *Harry Potter* before we started making *Witch*, Please my feelings about these books are indivisible from the making of this podcast, because it formed a reading community around me through which I have used the books to think through a number of things. We know we can do that with books. We can get together in a group and use a book as a tool through which-

**Marcelle Kosman** 39:52

Touchstone.

**Hannah McGregor** 39:53

Yeah, through which to think through things and have conversations. But again, that is a very different thing from claiming that by reading the book, some alchemy occurs in which now, you are good.

**Marcelle Kosman** 40:09

You have absorbed the lesson. Okay, so, Hannah, I have an idea for why I think we, as a culture, remain so committed to this concept of read book- absorb goodness= be good. So, it comes largely out of what you were describing. But there was one thing in particular, which we'll get to, okay? But I think that because, at least in Canada, elementary and high school English curricula use novels to teach civility, by surface level examination of my least favorite term in the world: themes.

**Hannah McGregor** 40:58

Mhm.

**Marcelle Kosman** 40:59

I think this is the problem, is what I'm saying. So let me give you an example.

**Hannah McGregor** 41:04

Oh, my God. I mean, my go to example, is the fact that we learn about racism in Canada as a theme by reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*. In Canada.

**Marcelle Kosman** 41:16

Yeah. Why? I know, I know. Here is the corollary.

**Hannah McGregor** 41:23

Okay, good. Good use of corollary.

**Marcelle Kosman** 41:25

Thank you. It's *Number the Stars* by Lois Lowry. Okay? So this is a novel that gets used all the time in elementary schools as part of units to teach children about the Holocaust. Okay? And I think it makes sense to bring in novels to teach children about really traumatic and scary events that happen, because, you know, you don't want to scare children beyond the capacity to learn. And you also want to Oh, no, oh, no. Oh, no, I hear myself repeating just all of the rhetoric that Yeah, Okay, nevermind, you're not a Coach. Let me start again.

**Hannah McGregor** 42:02

Yep. Yep. No, no, don't start again. I think it is absolutely fascinating. The way that like, as we begin to try to articulate, like, why is a novel a good teaching tool? Right? We fall back into this. This is exactly the case study that Driscoll does of like, educators are like, Yeah, okay. No, but novels are really, novels are helpful. They're good. They're a useful thing to learn with.

**Marcelle Kosman** 42:28

Okay. All right. Like, so.

**Hannah McGregor** 42:32

Maybe, maybe they are.

**Marcelle Kosman** 42:34

So in *Transfiguration*, Hannah, you talked about the reader needing to identify with the protagonist, right? And so this is the thing that really has me in a state about *Number the Stars*. Okay? So just for clarity, I haven't read it since I read it in elementary school. But here's what I remember. A blonde protagonist and her blonde family bravely hide a Jewish girl with dark hair from the Nazis during the Holocaust. I don't even remember what country but Google tells me that it was Denmark. Okay? The girl poses as the protagonist's sister. Here is what we did not learn. I don't remember what I did learn, but I can tell you for sure what I didn't. At no point did we learn to question the white non Jewish protagonist representation of the Holocaust.

At no point did we learn that prioritizing a white non Jewish perspective obscures the rampant anti-semitism among white non Jewish Europeans, who in fact collaborated with the Nazis. And we definitely did not learn to question the decision to learn about the Holocaust from the perspective of a white non Jewish protagonist written by a white non Jewish writer rather than, for example, a novel written by a Jewish writer about a Jewish child. So rather than engaging with a book like *Number The Stars* critically, we as children are told that it has a theme, and that the theme is that prejudice is bad. And so

if we read *Number The Stars*, we will learn that prejudice is bad. So then we will learn not to have prejudice, which is not what happened. I have done a lot of unlearning over the last 30 years. And a lot of that was prejudice.

**Hannah McGregor** 44:26

Yeah. So is it not what happened because the teacher taught the wrong book? Or is it not what happened because the teacher taught an appropriate book in the wrong way? Was there a right book that could have been taught in the right way that would have taught you that prejudice is bad?

**Marcelle Kosman** 44:54

I don't think so.

**Hannah McGregor** 44:55

Oh my God, then what the fuck are we doing in university level English courses?

**Marcelle Kosman** 44:52

Okay, well, here's what we're doing in university level English courses. At least this is what I think this is what I think I'm doing. I think I'm teaching people not to read for content, but to read in order to understand how things are represented. Right? So like to critically interrogate the function of the reading material as much as to critically interrogate the content of the material. So *Number the Stars*, I think, would be a really interesting book to look at in universities for how it teaches the white or non Jewish readers that this perspective is good and right, or how it prioritizes and centers the white European perspective.

**Hannah McGregor** 45:42

Okay, so which, what basically what we're doing on this podcast with *Harry Potter*?

**Marcelle Kosman** 45:47

Yes, exactly. So what I'm saying is, *[in a French accent]* I think we have solved the problem. *[Hannah laughs]*

**Hannah McGregor** 45:56

Well, thank goodness, no more problems here. Okay, Marcelle. So you pointed out that reading *Number the Stars* in grade school did not single handedly help you unlearn all of the deep forms of prejudice that are, you know, profoundly embedded in our culture at every level. So what has unlearning looked like for you? And has it involved books?

**Marcelle Kosman** 46:24

I mean, it's absolutely involved reading, I cannot deny that for me it has involved reading. But I don't think that that is the same thing as saying, reading X books, leads to this result, right? Like, I think I've had a lot of really patient educators, like university professors, workshop facilitators, like I have said some things in the past that keep me up at night, because they were very naive and ignorant things to have believed. And I think that without having had some of those experiences with very patient educators of various sorts, I think I might still believe some of those things. But I think it's a combination of things, right? It's not, it wasn't a book is what I'm saying. And it sure is shit wasn't *Harry Potter*.

**Hannah McGregor** 47:21

Yeah. And what's really interesting is that it's still tied up in education there. And this is where I feel like it all gets so tricky. This question of how do we learn from or with or alongside books, because books have also been, I mean, I wrote a whole book about this. Books have been really central to my own education. But that has been, in part, what I have learned from books and in part what I have then had to unlearn from those books and the ways in which I read them and what I have learned about books and what I've had to unlearn about books. But reading was one of a whole set of tools that I used along the way.

One thing I find really interesting, two things that I find really interesting. One is our ongoing insistence that reading ought to or does have an inherently unique quality that is better at teaching us than any other medium. You know that lots of kinds of culture and media gives us an opportunity to think about the world in different ways that we can then bring into conversations with our communities, into actions, into self driven prompts to go learn more about something because it's those reactions, right? It's what we do with the consumption of media that actually pivots the process of learning or unlearning. And we can do that with movies, documentaries, podcasts, TV shows, albums, music, absolutely undeniably, live theater, comedy, like there's a million forms of art that we can use to learn things about the world and to talk to each other about them and our preciousness about reading, which comes home to me again and again. Every time I watch somebody who prefers audiobooks struggle to articulate what they have done to the book that they just listened to on audiobook, that sense that it would be cheating to call it reading.

**Marcelle Kosman** 49:32

That's every time I hesitate to say that I read something.

**Hannah McGregor** 49:36

Yeah, absolutely. Which is simultaneously ableist default, right, of like, it's not real reading, like, Okay, well then. So no blind person has ever really read anything like, no, of course the second we apply pressure to that we realize that's just patently and obviously false. But, you know, it also demonstrates the way that we continue to be like, but reading by sitting alone with a book looking at it for a long time is inherently precious in a way that no other activity is. So you know, part of it is like, Okay, why reading? And there's historical reasons. And our episode on books touched on many of them. But it also just continues to be sort of a thing that I have a lot of personal question marks around. But the other thing, and the really key thing for this podcast is: why *Harry Potter*? Why *Harry Potter*, in particular?

**Marcelle Kosman** 50:33

I can see Coach in the corner just being like, when are you going to talk about the novel?

**Hannah McGregor** 50:37

Are you going to talk about *Harry Potter* even one time? **[Marcelle laughs]** You talked about fucking Lois Lowry for four hours.

**Marcelle Kosman** 50:47

We talked about *100 Years of Solitude*. I bet she's got shit to say about *The Merchant of Venice* too.

**Hannah McGregor** 50:53

What about the plot of *Anna Karenina*? **[Marcelle laughs]** Why *Harry Potter*? And I think this is particularly crucial to think about because of the completely unique role that *Harry Potter* plays in our culture. Which is that not only are they the most popular books of all time, by a landslide, for many people, they continue to be the only books they read. People read this series, they read it over and over and over again. So did *Harry Potter* teach them to love books? Or did *Harry Potter* teach them to love *Harry Potter*? And what about it? Why this series? Tell me Marcelle. We know the things about this series that makes it the non ideal singular series through which everybody can encounter the world. We've talked about every single one of those things throughout this podcast.

**Marcelle Kosman** 51:52

And we've talked about the internet and the role that the internet played in popularizing it.

**Hannah McGregor** 51:56



Why these books?

**Marcelle Kosman** 52:00

Many of my students who are Gen Zed, Gen Z, for you folks listening in America, have not read the *Harry Potter* books. They've seen some of the movies. But by and large, it is no longer the cultural touchstone that I can use to give examples for things, right?

**Hannah McGregor** 52:22

It's the only thing I had, and I can't identify with my students a single goddamn thing.

**Marcelle Kosman** 52:26

The reason why I bring this up is because I think that any claim that we might have wanted to make about the books themselves being inherently enjoyable or inherently precious or whatever, I don't know, whatever language we would want to use to say that they're special and there's something about the series. I think any such argument disintegrates, when we look at the fact that they have not continued to be popular. Maybe it's because Gen Zed slash Gen Z is just more trans inclusive and hates JK Rowling. I don't know. That would be awesome. I would love that. That sounds great. But somehow I suspect that that's not quite it.

**Hannah McGregor** 53:16

Marcelle, you answered the question, why not *Harry Potter*? Why *Harry Potter*?

**Marcelle Kosman** 53:24

Okay, it's the same answer I give every time. Are you ready? Because I think that as a generation, we're at a historical moment where compulsory heterosexuality and heteronormativity was not making sense to us. And so many of us were understanding ourselves to be queer in various iterations of that meaning at the same time that this book series came out about a kid who didn't know why everybody hated him, and then finds out it's actually just that he's special and belongs with a different community of people who are also special. I think that there's something in the overlap of the emergent social, not acceptability, because I don't know that we're there yet. But the visibility, the social legibility of queerness and *Harry Potter* that worked very elegantly as a metaphor, the magical community as a metaphor for queerness. I think that that, I think that that's it.

**Hannah McGregor** 54:35

I like that a lot.

**Marcelle Kosman** 54:36

That's all I got. And you know what, JK Rowling you get none of the credit for it. None, No, because we did that.

**Hannah McGregor** 54:44

What I'm thinking about is the way that, again, this kind of reading, this kind of middle brow reading for improvement is something that so many educators said, oh *Harry Potter* is particularly good at this. And so we'll use *Harry Potter* to teach people how to read, will use *Harry Potter* to teach people how to enjoy books and the way that we will teach people how to enjoy books as a mode of reading that does best with *Harry Potter*. So what we will teach people is how to read *Harry Potter*, we will teach people how to enjoy books that are like *Harry Potter*, we will teach people how to read in a way that most thrives when applied to *Harry Potter*.

And that's the tricky thing, right, that when we go back to dress schools point about how teaching literacy is incredibly unclear. What do we mean when we talk about teaching literacy? The particular mode of teaching literacy as identification with a character, learning about the world, and others through analogies, you know, finding a place for yourself imaginatively in the world that you're reading, so that you can imagine yourself into the experience as you're reading about it, all of the stuff that is framed as this kind of middle ground kind of reading. *Harry Potter* was not selected to be the book through which students learned these things by accident. It's a perfect fit, right? It's a perfect fit, because of that mode of teaching.

So if we had started off, if educators had started off with a totally different understanding of what it meant to teach literacy, if, for example, as historically, many people did, it was like, oh, literacy is teaching the classics. The end. Then you teach people the classics, and they read the classics, and you teach them to read in a way that makes them understand that the classics are good things to read. And so if we have a whole generation who has been taught that the ideal way to enjoy a book is modeled by the experience you have when reading *Harry Potter* in particular, then we've got a generation of people who are going to enjoy reading *Harry Potter* in particular.

**Marcelle Kosman** 57:10

I see the logic of that, that like using *Harry Potter*, as the model encourages people to see *Harry Potter* as the model. So I can understand how that would then, like, for example, for those folks still reading and rereading the series, right? Like, those are the only books that they like, I get that, but it doesn't explain why they liked them in the first place.

**Hannah McGregor** 57:35

I mean, that comes back to that, like, what does it mean to like a book? How do you know if you've liked a book? You start or you pick up a new book, you get 10 pages in. And you say, I'm enjoying this, or I'm not enjoying it. What about it? What is the experience of enjoyment? What does it mean to be enjoying that thing at that moment? Like, those are all things that we have an incredibly hard time articulating as a whole. Like, critics can often articulate it, but they're articulating it through a very particular cultural rubric.

**Marcelle Kosman** 58:11

They're not talking about what makes it look enjoyable. *[laughs]*

**Hannah McGregor** 58:15

And when I say, you know, we're taught to read *Harry Potter*, we're taught to enjoy *Harry Potter*, I mean all of these things that we've been unpacking for the past seven seasons, right? It's a hero's journey. It's a chosen one narrative, it follows all of these structuralist expectations around encounters with mean mommies, it treats a lot of big cultural issues as themes and analogies in a way that simplifies them and makes them more, you know, easy to stomach. And, you know-

**Marcelle Kosman** 58:48

And as we've also discussed, it has been paired with a very deliberately constructed reading community that the author herself participates in. And so it feels, or at least it felt like a sort of fun way of being part of the *Harry Potter* world, even if you weren't.

**Hannah McGregor** 59:10

Yeah. And simultaneously, for all of the way that it has been treated in this really sort of overdetermined way of like, you know, we're going to learn how to read in a particular kind of way, and we're going to do it through *Harry Potter* and here's what you're gonna learn from *Harry Potter*. It has also proven to be a tremendously slippery and uncontrollable property, because yes, people adhered to it but people have in droves rejected the author. Rejected, do you see that the market share value of Pottermore went down by like 40% last year? Like people rejecting Rowling, people are rejecting her attempt to control the reading community, people are taking control over the text.

So even this book, even this book series, which has been culturally positioned in such a forceful way, as a like, you'll read it, and through reading it, you will learn how to read right. You will learn how to be the kind of reader we want you to be. People have been like, alright, I'll read these books and whoops, gay. Whoops, made me gay.

**Marcelle Kosman** 1:00:22

**[laughs]** Oh, I wasn't gay before I started them. But now..

**Hannah McGregor** 1:00:25

It's so intriguing to me the way that despite being a wild outlier, *Harry Potter* is a wild outlier. It's hard to make any big claims about books or reading based on *Harry Potter*, because nothing else has ever been like *Harry Potter*, and possibly nothing else will ever be like *Harry Potter*, it may indeed be a just totally wild fluke of the early 2000s.

Og just a thing that happened and can maybe never happen again. But even within that really, really specific cultural formation the things people have done with these books has been totally unpredictable, totally uncontrollable. If anybody could control what people did with her books, that would have been JK Rowling, because she has all the money and all the cultural power, and she has absolutely failed to control them.

**Marcelle Kosman** 1:01:21

Well, turns out being a massive asshole isn't a way to make anybody do what you want.

**Hannah McGregor** 1:01:27

I really think that we need to talk more about Rowling herself and the way sort of she has a public persona shaped the reading of the books and the way that she has changed the reading of the books as a result of being outwardly and openly transphobic. And I kind of feel like maybe we should do an episode about the concept of the author.

**Marcelle Kosman** 1:01:48

Hannah, I think that's a great idea. I think that we can bring in some Michel Foucault and maybe a little bit of **[in a thick French accent]** Ronald Bach. You're welcome for that, Coach.

**(Witch, Please Theme Music plays)**

**Hannah McGregor** 1:02:15

Thank you, witches, for joining us for another episode of *Witch, Please*. If you want more of us, which you obviously do, we're on Twitter and Instagram at @ohwitchplease and, of course, on Patreon, at [patreon.com/ohwitchplease](https://patreon.com/ohwitchplease), where you can get all kinds of sweet perks *and* follow along with our journey as we figure out what's next for the *Witch, Please* team. Also, I would like you to read my book, it's called *A Sentimental Education*, and it's available in print and ebook and audiobook formats. All the formats! And whichever format you choose, I think it counts as reading.

**Marcelle Kosman 1:02:57**

What a good point, Hannah. *Witch, Please* is produced in partnership with Wilfrid Laurier University Press and distributed by Acast. You can find the rest of our episodes at [ohwitchplease.ca](http://ohwitchplease.ca), which is expanding every day thanks to our awesome newest team member Baby, I mean Gaby, who has helped us launch a newsletter! You can join that at our website.. You can also find transcripts, merch, heck just go check it out. Special thanks AS ALWAYS to our *executive* producer, Hannah Rehak, aka COACH! **[Soundbite of a sports whistle]** to our social media manager and marketing designer, Zoe Mix **[Soundbite of a record rewinding]**, and to our sound engineer Erik Magnus! **[Soundbite of wind chimes]**

**Hannah McGregor 1:03:57**

At the end of every episode we shout-out everyone who left us a 5-star review on Apple Podcasts, so you've gotta review us if you want to hear Marcelle *Go home, get ahead, light-speed internet*  
*I don't wanna talk about the way that it was*

**Marcelle Kosman 1:04:13**

Thanks this week to: ako911, Zoe Aitch, anna clarice, \$im1! , Djin3, and fgght7hruhrygyhdyehdrydh. Thanks for that one. That was cathartic.

**Hannah McGregor 1:04:31**

We'll be back next episode to add to the Appendices. But until then:

**Marcelle Kosman 1:04:38**

Later, witches!

***(Witch, Please Theme Music plays)***