

Rogue Librarians, Episode 16
The Librarian of Basra (Part 2: Close Reading)

Welcome to the 16th episode of Rogue Librarians, a podcast in which three librarians discuss banned books. We are your hosts, Marian, Dorothy, Alanna, and we are the Rogue Librarians. We would love for you to participate in our discussion. Please visit theroguelibrarians.com or follow us on Instagram or Facebook @roguelibrarianspod or on Twitter @RLibrarians.

So, uh let's open this discussion with a different question um kind of coming from this book. So, Dorothy, if you could save one book from your house, if your house were burning down, what would it be?

All right. All right. Well, my house has a lot of books in it. Um Is it, is it ok to say whichever one I'm currently reading because that would be like everything else you can replace, right? I do have a couple of signed copies, but Margaret Atwood's that are signed. But um but yeah, I think I'd probably grab whichever one I've had my nose in the most recently and that would be, oh, wow. Uh Right now, um Right now that would, I'm mostly immersed in an audio book, so I wouldn't have to grab an actual book. But, um, the one that's been in my purse is, um, men explain things to me. Hm. Essays. Um, and I'm gonna forget the author's name, but she's very well known. Is it good? Uh, it's, it's great. Very feminist. Rebecca Solnit.

Ah, ok. Cool. Awesome. Uh, what would you, what would you take out of a burning house? No time to think.

Yeah. This is so hard to choose. Uh I would probably grab one of my copies of Jane Austen's novels. I have more than one copy of each one. So probably whichever one I can grab first. But um I have uh a few of the um really large beautiful copies that were um annotated as well for a few of my favorites, including *Pride and Prejudice* and *Persuasion*. So I would probably grab one of those, but it would be very hard to choose. And like you said, in the moment, I don't know what I would do, but that's probably what I would choose. What about you, Marian?

So again, this is, this is a painful question because it's like which child would you save my books for my babies? Um But thinking about a book that just was so rich to me. Um And to my, to my daughter, um it's a book by David Levithan that I learned about um listening to John Green, talk

about David Levithan, but the book is called *Every Day*. Um and it's just such a cool book because it's, it's, it's just about, uh, a, if a soul, you know, separate from a body, a soul. Um, it's a, the story is about a soul that wakes up every day in a completely different body. And so has to go through that day, um, literally walking in someone else's shoes. And I just find that the whole concept of that is brilliant and really, to me that exemplifies what libraries are all about.

Cool, nice. Uh And just a reminder that we are moving our usual, what are we reading discussion uh to be a Patreon perk because we tend to take a little long while we discuss those.

Yeah, so you can listen to more of our preferred books if you become a member of our Patreon. So today we are continuing our discussion of *The Librarian of Basra, A True Story of [from] Iraq* by Jeanette Winter. First published in 2005, this picture book is based on the true story of the experiences of Alia Muhammed Baker during the invasion of Iraq in 2003. It won an ALA Notable Children's Book Award in 2006. According to the ALA, it was the 96th most challenged or banned book from 2010 to 2019. It has been challenged for being un-American, promoting a religion besides Christianity, and being too violent for young children. And you can learn more about that by listening to our previous episode on this book. So, Dorothy, do you mind reminding us what this book is about?

This book is about a librarian in the city of Basra during the Iraq war. And um it's based on a true story that the *New York Times* uh published about a woman who foresaw the potential for the library to be burned. And so took it upon herself to move the books and saved them. And then the burning did come about so was excellent foresight on her part. And she saved 30,000 books, right? 70%. Yeah. 30,000, which was 70% of what the library held, which is an incredible number. Yes. And I, I read in some of my research that she just always lamented the ones that she couldn't save because like you, Marian, she said the books are like her children. Wow. I think a lot of librarians feel that way. Yeah. And book lovers in general, actually.

Mhm. Well, should we move on to our first segment? So we're going to start with characterization like usual. And this book really focuses on one character, Alia, who Dorothy was just telling us some about. So, should we start with her? Absolutely. Well, ok. I was gonna say, you know, in a, in a picture book, we don't find out as much about the character because it's just so short. Um And some of what I know about her, I learned from reading articles about her. So I'm trying to separate those out and just focus on this book. Um, but I really was impressed

by, uh, her love for books, her love for the library. The fact that she, as you said, had the foresight to see what might happen once the war began. Uh, it was just really impressive.

Yeah, I, when I think of Alia, the picture that comes to mind is the, the picture that's the first picture in the book of her. Um that just shows her standing in front of some buildings, hugging four books to her chest with this just very content look on her face. And to me that exemplifies who Alia is. You know, you learn everything you need to know about her for the purpose of this book from that picture. And, and I know that, you know, she's supposed to be standing a bit apart from the buildings because they show the water and she's, you know, standing next to the, to the water, the on the coast. Um But she appears to be larger than life like a hero would be. Um So to me that, that is what she's about, I also am just getting a very uh motherly and caring vibe from the pictures, especially that first one where she's hugging, hugging the book.

Um I also noticed that she's not terrifically differentiated from the other, in terms of character design, the other characters, which I think is maybe by design as well because she is, uh, representing, uh, as Jeanette Winter has said one, you know, what difference one person can make and she is just that she is a person. She doesn't seem to be like she's larger than life in that first picture. But when you look, for instance, at the next page where there's a bunch of people in the library, uh, you almost have to look to pick her out, you know.

Right. And I think for a child, the fact that she's wearing the same clothing in every picture helps you realize like, oh, this is the woman we're talking about because like you said, there are sometimes other people shown in the pictures but she's always wearing the same colored hijab, the same colored dress. And, um, it's her, uh, facial expressions that change in each picture.

Yeah. And she's very human. You know, she's, she's presented as a super superhero in the sense that the power of one she does something that's so remarkable, but I don't think that she would tell you that she's remarkable. Oh, I agree. Think she's very humble. She's just, she's just a human being.

Yep. But human beings can do great things. I like also this, um, or maybe I just identify with it but this idea that, well, I'll just do it then, you know, like she starts by herself and then other people come in and help, which is great. But I think, you know, she was the one that started the project and then people saw this and offered to help. Uh, but I'm, I'm fond of, uh, just trying to

jump in and do something even if it seems like it's gonna be difficult. Uh, I just am like, well, all right, then let's get started. The example I can think of right now is, uh, helping my kid move a very heavy dresser up the stairs of a, a New York walk up and the four roommates together could not manage to figure out how to get this thing up the stairs. And I came in and we were waiting for people and I was just like, well, let me try a thing and I ended up basically flipping it. So just using its own leverage to turn it till I could go to the next stair where I could kind of stand up and then just buy myself because that's like, I'm just like, well, we could do this. So I love that about her. I love that. You know. Well, let me just get started with these books. Mhm.

And I, I think you see the, how brave she is in doing that in some of the later pictures when the soldiers are coming door to door. And, um, you know, and she knows that something bad might happen if they find the books. Yeah, especially because she's asked for per, excuse me, for permission. From the governor who has said no. Um, which is interesting. It is interesting. Um, and I wonder whether that's meant to be an economist statement?

I think probably they simply didn't care that much about whether or not the books were saved or were thinking we have better things to bigger things to worry about.

Yeah. I think they didn't want to perhaps expend the manpower to, to worry about moving books when they were preparing to be bombed, potentially.

Well, should we move on to the other characters? Yes. Yes. Uh Any ideas how we say the spell, his name on an or a or a n he's not sure spelled Anis. Yes, I am an or an an, let's go with an Anis Mohammed is uh Ayah's friend and neighbor who lives across the wall and owns a restaurant, um, across the wall from the library and owns a restaurant and Alia reaches out to him to say, can you help me to save the books? And of course, Anis says yes.

Yeah. And it seems like he's taking a big risk by saying yes, you see that when the soldier comes to the door and ask him why he has a gun and he says to protect my business and luckily they leave without searching. But, um, it's, he's clearly worried about what might happen. He is, I, I like uh where I get the most feeling about him is when they are uh let me just start that sentence over again where you get the most feeling about him is the picture where they are packing up the books. She's asked him to help and on his and they don't attribute the quotes all to him. But it feels to me like it's all him. He's not just I can help. He's like here you use his

curtains to wrap him up. Here are some crates. You use these sacks, the books must be saved. It's like, really throws himself into the effort, you know, with very little goading. So, um, I, I do like that about him.

Right. And he also, um, has his brothers and some other shopkeepers and neighbors, um, come and help. So he's someone who's connected in the community and trusted clearly. Um, and so he's able to get other people rounded up to, to participate as well. Right. Mhm. Now, those are the only two named characters, uh, did any of the other, uh, people that showed up on the pages give you any thoughts?

Well, the governor, I want to go back to the governor. Um, I mean, I know we kind of talked around him or about why he may have said no. But, um, I don't think it's all that unusual that he said no. Um, and it just made me think of other times in history where, um, you know, people or things are not protected in, in favor of, you know, doing buying into whatever is going on. Um, in this case, the war, he is by far the person with the sour expression on his face in the book and that's about all we get of him. But he's like he looks very grumpy and annoyed. Yep. And scary.

Yeah. And I kind of feel that way with the pictures of the other soldiers that we see from time to time. Um, when you can see facial expressions, they're, they're frightening. Um, because you, you know, there are people with a machine gun and you don't know who they will think is the enemy and who they will think is, um, you know, an ally at any point. Yeah. Right. No, that's for the soldiers. That's definitely true. Yeah, it's interesting. Like the soldiers who are clearly Iraqi, um, look more concerned, um, when they're looking at the sky and then, um, one of them is running away when the fires start. So they look more scared of what's going to happen and the soldiers who show up who are more, who are probably British, I guess is what they're supposed to be. Um, you see a few of them, um, like you said, they're, they're not scary or intimidating in terms of their facial expressions, but the fact that they're holding these guns, it is still scary, I'm sure.

Right. So our next segment is on themes and there were several that occurred to us while we were reading this picture book. I'm gonna start with one that the author Jeanette Winter wanted people to take away from reading this book, which is that one person can make a difference. And it's certainly true that Alia is the one who has the idea and the drive to save the books from the library. As we were discussing, though, she doesn't do it alone. She has the help of her

friend, a man who owns the restaurant and his brothers and neighbors. And so it really is a joint effort because without their help, she most likely would not have been able to save 30,000 books on time. Um But she probably would still have saved some of them on her own. Uh But it really is this communal effort to um bring them to safety. But um aside from all of that, it is her drive to do it. That makes a difference and it seems like Winter wants us to realize that any of us can make a difference in our own lives uh with whatever is important to us.

And she also makes it clear that it's really brave for Alia to have done what she did. It's really brave to protect your country's history. She saved a 700 year old book. She saved so many other books that would tell people about things that are important in Iraq. And without someone like her, you could lose an entire culture's history as we said earlier. So, um it really is hugely important that she did this. And I, I love the way that uh when you say one person can make a difference, it doesn't mean you do it alone, but it does mean that someone's gotta start the ball rolling. You know, someone's gotta stand up and say, hey, we need to do this, start doing it and you know, others will follow.

And I think that's one of the reasons why it's such a powerful theme in a picture book. Um even for very young children, because young children don't always feel like, well, let's face it. Most people don't feel like the power of one is very powerful. And I know um when I used to be a teacher that the young elementary students I taught would be like, well, what can I do? I don't have any power. And you know, if you share a book like this with young students in the, you know, range of 7, 5, 6, 7, it demonstrates to them how powerful one person can be to just start with an idea and then get motivated, get people motivated.

And I have seen so many kids over the years doing really amazing things, starting apps because they're allergic to something and they wanted an app for people in the neighborhood to be able to know what, you know, restaurants would be good. They have that allergy just like one kid doing this, another kid who started a whole um a whole charity to help uh former military uh get to college, go through college. Uh So, you know, I've met people who were helped by these things. It's amazing what individuals could do.

Definitely. And, and that young, that young lady who, um uh who wants to save the environment. And Greta, yeah, I mean, again, the power of one, so many examples. Uh And then of course, we've got the power of books and reading because it is about saving a library.

Um And you know, opening with the quote, the way that it does. Uh the first thing Mohammed said was read, I think is very powerful statement uh that it's, if books should be one of the most treasured possessions of a culture. And as you pointed out earlier, Marian, when you destroy books, you destroy culture and they kind of go hand in hand.

So I want to steer a little bit clear of saying that if you read, you know, you are good because there's plenty of people who read books that, you know, might not be great people, but the more you read the different books you read and the different cultures that you expose yourself to. I think that can only be a positive thing.

Mhm. I also think it, it bears repeating that when in the book, she starts to talk about saving the books, she talks not just about the books that are in Arabic, which is, you know, would be more modern Iraqi books, but also books in English and books of different religions. You know. So she's not just trying to save one part of a culture, she's trying to save the whole, um, diverse culture and including a 700 year old book, irreplaceable. And in 2003, you know, it was a lot harder to get a hold of books in ways other than libraries and, you know, physical books.

Right. That's absolutely true. Um, yeah. And then of course, another theme is, is about war and how war affects everyone in some way. Um, and, you know, we discussed in the pros and cons in our previous segment how, um, showing images of fire and soldiers might be frightening to some young children. Um, and, you know, I don't disagree with that but at the same time, you know, this is a book that is not being published just for Americans. It's being, it's, it's a book that has been published and presumably will find its way around the world. Um, there are many cultures that people are living in all around the world where war is just a state of existence and, um, at different times in our history, that's been our existence. And, um, I think universally we can agree that war is awful. Um, and that it's not a goal for a lot of people except maybe Hamilton back in the day, he wanted a war. He thought it would be a great equalizer. But, um, but I want to talk about, you know, the importance of peace. Um, you know, after World War I, everyone who was involved in World War I suffered because of it wanted that to be the war that would end all wars, that there never would be another one. And then, of course, World War II happened and again, everyone said this should be the end of it. We, we don't want to do this again. It's, you know, it's destroying so many lives and generations. Um, and yet still in our lifetimes we've seen and heard of or experienced war or war, like things attacks on our country,

attacks on other countries. Um, so, you know, so I'm sure that most people can agree that peace would be the goal. And, uh, you know, I also want to talk about the fact that because children are involved. Um, you know, if you're watching the nightly news and you're watching about, you know, the situation in Ukraine, um, you know, children are being exposed to war, um, they're, they're, they're being exposed. So, um, I think talking about peace is, is a really important concept and, and certainly, um, that is, um, Alia's dream in this book is, is that that beautiful, full spread of her waiting for the war to end and waiting and dreaming of peace.

Yeah, that's beautifully put. All right. So our final segment is where we try to find other ways to get into the text and think about it's uh a little deeper, more deeply. And uh so the first one of those is thinking about some other media, song, TV show, et cetera, a movie uh that you think of, you know, connects to the book in some way that you might recommend a character or um the author listen to. And I was immediately reminded of a song by Anais Mitchell who people may know as the person who wrote *Hadestown*, the musical that's on Broadway currently. Um And she wrote this song back during, uh I believe it was during the Iraq War. Uh She was studying abroad and traveling around that, you know, Middle East and she was wanted to write about the war from the perspective of children, of an American child and an Iraqi child. And in her travels, she ran across um a fellow who was a poet and he was so excited to help her. She didn't feel qualified to write this Iraqi, you know, person's POV. Um So she was talking with this guy at a Syrian hotel and they were near the border and he knew Iraqi, they knew the dialects and he was like, I'm gonna write you something and he wrote her pages and pages and she just used a little snippet of it. So the setup is there's a um and this is another connection. Uh It's part of it is based on a newspaper article uh as this book was. So the article was about a kid, a family in America who were so afraid of an anthrax attack. Uh, you know, that kind of weaponry that he had hermetically sealed the house. And they were literally just like suffocating in their own house and the kid was not allowed to go outside. And, um, of course, in Iraq, you've got people, um, you know, blocking the windows so they don't get bombed and also hiding inside on the bomb. So these are the two kids kind of in a similar situation. And uh just a couple of the lines that I think really speak to this. Um And the Iraqi child's lines are sung at Iraqi, so I don't have those handy. But the American kid says, my daddy told me some people hate us, they even hate me. I'm just a kid. So I asked how come but he didn't answer. So I started thinking it was something I did uh which I, it's just so heartbreaking to me, you know, to that people will, that children will internalize this. And also just brings up the importance of context, context, context. You've got to talk to kids about this, you cannot just hide it from them. Uh And then later

in the song, he says, sometimes I can't fall asleep when I'm supposed to, I'm thinking about something I saw on TV. There was this house in a field full of houses it was the bad guys living in there and I saw this kid looking out from the window, he didn't look bad. He only looked scared and, you know, it was just really seeing the connection between the kids and I think, you know, it, it fits nicely with a lot of the themes and the uh the timing of this. And then I just wanna throw a teeny tiny little plug. I will not go into it. But there is a movie called um *Men with Guns*, which is an amazing film about war from the perspective of neither of the groups with guns. So also applicable.

Thank you, Dorothy. And as far as I know, um the main languages spoken in Iraq are Arabic and Kurdish. So do you know if it was in Arabic or not?

I do not. But I, you know, we can find some information and put it in the show notes for people to take a look at and probably a link to the song would be appropriate as well.

Sounds great. I want to listen to it myself now. Me too. Thank you, Dorothy. So I'm going to give a question and um the question I have is one that we've touched on a little bit already. But um once we decided to read this book, I also read another picture book by Jeanette Winter, which we mentioned called *Nasreen's Secret School*, which is subtitled a true story from Afghanistan. And this is about a girl who, um, it hasn't been able to learn how to read and write because the Taliban took over and her father was taken away by the Taliban and her mother disappeared when she went to look for him. So her grandmother decides that she should be sent to this secret school so that she can learn. And her, her granddaughter eventually blossoms there. And um you see the importance of learning in that book too. Um But the way the Taliban are portrayed in that book is much more negative, um in terms of how they look, um they are, I think a little more, uh they look a little more like stereotypes there and definitely look much more scary than the soldiers in the library in a Basra. So I was wondering what you two think, why Jeanette Winter would make the choice to present the Taliban in a more negative light than she does the soldiers in the war in Iraq. And if you think there's any particular reason for that.

Well, the first thing that jumps into my mind is that the Taliban is in a sense from my understanding, trying to destroy a portion of a culture. So anything that is not like high, highly conservative. And um, I don't know, I just, I feel like maybe that's Jeanette Winter's personal reaction is that, you know, in this book, *The Librarian of Basra*, it's not the culture turning on

itself. It's, you know, the culture, the country Iraq preparing for an invasion or an attack that's going to be coming and trying to protect um you know, these precious books that represent the culture where with the, what you just described um *Nasreen's Secret School*, it almost sounds like it's internal, it's like this civil um you know, within the country, it's not civil but it's within the country and it's a country turning on its own fellow country people.

Sure. So there's a clear villain in this story and attacking um people's education and history more clearly. Yeah, I think it, I don't know what the message, the overall, you know, message of that book is.

But I, I think it's um how important education is and how much you can grow as a person uh by developing your mind. So I don't know whether it has anything then to do with uh standing up against those forces that would, you know, necessitate giving, fleshing them out a little bit more. Right?

It's more of a, a secret thing and they're not openly standing up to the Taliban. They are pretending to read just the Koran when they come in to check on this, you know, the school, they don't know that the girls are leading, are learning how to read and write and do other things. Um So, yeah, it's like, it's like they, they're not trying to tear down the system or um because the, the father was taken away, the mother disappeared. They don't know what happens to them. Um So it's like in both books, you can see how important learning is and uh for the individual and for the entire population, but it's a, a different way of portraying that. Well, Marian, do you want to take us to a passage or image that struck you?

Yeah. So here's something a little more hopeful. Um And I kind of already alluded to it, but I given that this is a picture book I think. Um it's, it's the picture that really is what grabbed me. And in all that, you know, we've described about this book, the picture that is the most beautiful to me is the picture of Alia dreaming of peace and it's the colors are beautiful and you see you see white doves, she's, she's just kind of got her face turned towards what I would presume is the sun, her eyes are closed. She looks very peaceful. Um And there are the doves of peace and um there are a lot of sorry, sorry, a lot of blues like very calm colors. Yeah, a lot, very calm, good point, and the flowers I guess are lily pads, but lilies also always represent peace to me for some reason or a new life. Um And you know, and then anyway, so the words are she waits for war to end. She waits and dreams of peace. And there's this beautiful image of a person in a,

what I, you know, kind of what I would think is a biblical looking boat. Um, almost like a, um, one of the gondolas from Venice. Um, and she's, you know, rolling, rowing it or pulling, you know, pulling the boat forward with the stick and, but looking very biblical to me, but just the piece and then when you turn the page, Alia opens her eyes and she's looking at this beautiful um you know, image in her dream, clearly, she waits and dreams of a new library. So the library is the building being re you know, it's the building intact, but it's in the, in, in the middle of layers of, of opened flowers as you know, kind of a rebirthing kind of experience and that just really touched me a lot. Um And, you know, kind of goes back to my, my comments before about theme of, you know, that we, we dream of peace. Um I think most people would say that, you know, they dream of peace, what you know, I can't tell you how many people I've said, you know, what would you like uh as a gift or what, you know, what, what do you want? And they'll say, you know, peace on earth. Wouldn't that be a lovely, a lovely thing? I like that. The library also is peace. Libraries, equal peace, libraries do equal peace. Um At least in America, libraries, particularly public libraries are meant to be public buildings for all users. And uh yeah, it's a place where people can come and gather and hopefully find peace.

Thank you, Marian, for sharing that.

Sure. Alrighty. Well, um I think this pretty much wraps up our discussion of *The Librarian of Basra*. In the next two episodes, we will discuss *Looking for Alaska* by John Green. Uh I know we're all looking forward to this one. If you would like to leave us a comment or a question, please visit theroguelibrarians.com or follow us on Instagram or Facebook @roguelibrarianspod. Or on Twitter @RLibrarians. If you're enjoying the podcast, please subscribe on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Stitcher, or wherever you find your podcasts, and please leave us a rating and review additionally. Please consider supporting us on Patreon at patreon.com/roguelibrarians. You can hear our book recommendations and other bonus audio content and we will give you personalized book recommendations and other great perks. Thanks Chris, you brilliant musician, for creating our music and to Lizzie uh for doing our beautiful audio editing and always just being there to help us with all technical difficulties. We could not do this podcast without either of them. And finally, thanks to all of you for reading with us because books are meant to be read. Bye.