

Teachin' Books Episode 1.14 - Interview with Rebekah Ludolph / Hiromi Goto's *The Kappa Child*

[Music: "Homer Said" by [Dyalla Swain](#)]

Jessica McDonald 0:10

Hey! This is Teachin' Books, a podcast all about the ways people teach, learn, and work with literature. I'm Jessica McDonald, and on today's episode I am chatting with Rebecca Ludolph, who is a PhD candidate in literary studies at Wilfrid Laurier University. And we're chatting today about more book club experiences, specifically Rebecca's book club experience, reading Hiromi Goto's 2001 novel *The Kappa Child*.

Jess 0:43

So I met Rebecca at a conference a couple of years ago, where I heard a bit about her research which, you know from that conference talk, was on reading for social change, and I heard her talk a little bit about damage-centered reading practices in and around book clubs, especially book clubs made up of white women who sort of, quote unquote, "read to learn."

Jess 1:08

I had been thinking a lot about her work in 2020, because I was reading a lot myself. And I was also thinking through the implications of this idea of "reading as work" or "reading as labor" or "reading to learn," especially in the context of amplifications of Black Lives Matter, the ongoing struggles against racial violence, and also just personally because at the same time I was joining the first book club that I had ever joined in my life, which I know I've told you all about which is the Alice Munro book club. And so I was thinking about the politics of reading in ways that I hadn't before, in 2020, the dynamics of reading collaboratively because I seem to have been doing that a little bit more in 2020 strangely enough, while it was a very isolated time and isolating year. Plus, this podcast came about and so I was thinking about teaching and learning contexts sort of far and wide, really loosely figured, and how book clubs fit into, complicate, or are complicated versions themselves of teaching and learning environments.

So Rebecca's work had been on my mind. I asked her if she would be so good as to come on the podcast and chat with me about her book club experiences given her research expertise, and that's what we do in this episode.

Jess 2:28

So first things first, usually, as you know, I just like to give a spoiler alert that if you haven't read this novel, *The Kappa Child*, and you are interested in reading it, we do talk about the whole novel, and in fact, Rebecca gives an amazing, detailed but also concise summary of the novel, and it's a really complicated and beautifully complex novel, so I'm so admire her for being able to summarize it so well.

Yeah, if you... I lost my train of thought there. But if you, if you have not read the novel and you want to, then this is your cue to stop the episode and, you know, just go read it. If not, or if you've already read it, I hope you have, then stick with me. Here is my chat with Rebecca.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

Jess 3:19

How about just to start if you want to tell the listeners a little bit about yourself?

Rebecca Ludolph 3:24

My name is Rebecca Ludolph, and I'm a PhD candidate at Wilfrid Laurier University. I'm working with Dr. Tanis McDonald. I live and work and have for most of my life lived on the traditional territory of the Anishinaabe, the Haudenosaunee, and the Neutral people, specifically the Haldimand Tract, which is the land that was promised to the Haudenosaunee as their home, and is, at this moment, still being actively contested. In my scholarly work, I'm interested in literary cultures that are invested in the idea that reading fiction has an important role in working for social change, societal betterment, however you want to describe that. And in particular, I'm interested in the reading practices that have been ascribed to a demographic that is primarily made up of white women, which would include myself, though I'm talking about non-professional reading practices much of the time and I am increasingly a more professionalized reader. So, that's a contested boundary for me. But the main belief that I devote a lot of my time to is this idea that literature can provide a window into the experience of someone else who's different than you -- someone who's had a different life experience. And that your emotional response to this textual depiction provides the reader with some knowledge of what it means to be that other person, and that this produces a kind of empathy that's necessary for social change. And so I'm looking at some of the assumptions in that, while also trying not to throw out the idea that an emotional response to books is actually something that might be ambivalent, but can be powerful and can be transformative. And of course doing all that working within, because I'm looking at what is often under the umbrella of Canadian literature within a settler-colonial context, where books have been a part of nation-building, canon-building has been a part of nation-building. So that's where I sit, quite literally and also academically.

Jess 5:41

Lovely! I actually didn't realize that maybe through this conversation today we might be fulfilling a listener request I got because once you started talking about empathy, and I should have known this based on what you what I know about your work, but I had a listener request to talk about the relationship between literature and empathy on this on this podcast. So perhaps this episode will get into that, that realm depending on where our conversation goes today, so yay! That's unexpected.

Jess 6:09

And as I was telling you off, sort of off camera before we started recording, like a lot of what you do in your work relates to so much of what has come up for me in this podcast, in the conversations I've been having with people about whether reading and literature produces so social change: social change for who, or what are the assumptions behind that premise -- the idea that reading can produce empathy, or reading across difference is good. Like you said, you're looking at both the assumptions and the possibilities that that kind of thing like it sounds like you're both being critical of that premise but also honoring the possibilities within that premise. Is that right to say?

Rebecca 6:48

Yeah, and one of the things I really notice is, I mean I'm so bad at giving a description of my work briefly -- like I tend to freeze when someone asks, "and what's your dissertation on?" And, you know, if I get out "I'm looking at books and social change." People often go, "Oh yeah, books, like, and social change!" like and are so excited about it, and then I feel like such a pessimist going back and going, "uh, but..."

Jess 7:17

Yeah, exactyl!

Rebecca 7:18

I'm not so sure!

Jess 7:21

Being like, "Wait wait wait a minute, that's maybe not where I'm going with this. Like I'm yeah, I'm taking a critical approach to it, and other things, I'm sure, doing other things with that topic." Yeah. Well, it can just be so especially for people who grew up being book lovers and white women if I can say, and add on to what you're saying, white women who grow up being book lovers and believing in, often harmfully, in the sort of possibilities of reading for quote unquote "helping" communities who are marginalized or communities who are oppressed, like even that whole "helping" discourse that we learn about through and alongside reading. Like it can feel so idealistic and it can feel so life changing, but there's such troubling, you know, disconcerting assumptions and impulses and attitudes and biases that are underneath a lot of, a lot of that.

Rebecca 8:20

And I would say that I hold alongside that the reality that reading novels, reading fiction, going to plays, watching movies has often spurred on a search for knowledge and things that I didn't know about. And I'm glad I learned about. So like, that's also true. And I'm also grateful that I get to bang up against my own ignorance in a book so much of the time, first before I do in front of a real person right? Like I'd rather confront the issues in my beliefs while I'm reading a book than in having harmed a real person through something I've said or done. Not that reading a book stops things from happening, but like I'm... yeah, I'm also grateful for the shelter learning within books can provide. But yes, a whole bunch of assumptions go along with it, about the impact that that that has in the world right. Yeah.

Jess 9:20

Oh that's really interesting. Like I feel like I always kind of have thought that, but you just articulated it so well this idea that reading can be a way of sort of engaging with something that's different from you in a way that hopefully minimizes the harm you could cause through that engagement, or something like that.

Jess 9:39

So, I guess all of this really does lead into why you're here, which is to talk about a couple of things. It's to talk about this book called *The Kappa Child*, which I'll let you describe in a second, if you like. We're also here to talk about your experiences reading *The Kappa Child* in a book club. So I'm not sure which is easier, but I was thinking maybe first you could talk about your book club experiences in general to sort of set the scene for those who, for those who might want to know.

Rebecca 10:07

Yeah, so part of what I think when I was thinking through this I actually thought was funny, it was like "Okay so when did I start engaging with a book club?" And it was actually while I between my Masters and my PhD, when I was at home with my newborn daughter and my partner was away at school for the year, so I was like at home alone with the baby and I'm like wow, this is the stereotype of why white women go to book clubs.

Rebecca 10:37

But it was very true and it was a actually a really lovely experience. And it was a way for me to go be with other people, have other people who would hold the baby, and we'd talk about books, and it was great emotional support in that way, and so much life knowledge in the room, and such a wealth of reading... These are people who have read their entire lives, just a really lovely, supportive group to be in at that stage in my life. At the same time, it was a it was a moment of realizing over the course of the year that oh, these are different interpretive practices, and I've so been intensely... because your

Master's degree, at least for me, was such an intense like adjust adjust to this like academic way of being. So like having come out of doing that for a year, and then going back into a more casual reading atmosphere and noticing the differences in the way we were reading, not quite knowing how to engage my academic self in this atmosphere. And what value it had or not being confused about what books to suggest.

Rebecca 11:50

And at the same time, noticing that one of the privileges of being in the academic sphere, while it is definitely its own bubble, at least the academic sphere I'd been coming out of at UVic, had people approaching literature from a variety of perspectives. And when I was in a book club atmosphere -- in this book club, I've gone on to be in some other contexts -- everyone was very much coming from the same background, all white women, all my mother's age or slightly older, all middle class. So noticing that this is a different atmosphere and it's a... the academic bubble is still a bubble. This is a different bubble and could sometimes act as an echo chamber in the way people were reading.

Rebecca 12:42

But I can talk a bit more about some of the specificities of that later when we talk about the book, maybe, but this experience really convinced me that as I was going into my PhD I wanted to keep engaging with like what I came to think about is like real people reading books. Like, and because there was a part of me that felt like, well, in some ways it's way more important what people outside the academy are using books for: their opinions travel more widely, they influence their children and their grandchildren, day-to-day conversations that they believe about the world, more than anything, I'm going to write in academia is gonna like get out to anybody outside the academic bubble, so just... It really was a, oh I I want to stay engaged with this.

Rebecca 13:33

So then I made a point of going to actually two other book clubs developed over the course of my PhD. And, of course, I could not attend all of these all the time. But I've made a point of going to them. Some of them are more diverse in terms of who attends them than others, both racially and in terms of whether people have grown up in Canada or not, linguistically one, one of them has several people who English is not their first language, which is a place where I definitely noticed how some of the books I would be like excited about introducing are really difficult if English is not your first language. Socioeconomically, not very diverse. All of them, all women. And, but I've also made a point of attending when Laurier has a like Laurier Reads kind of thing, as well as, there's a prof from UW who led a kind of branch-off of Pam Palmater's what's it called Reconciliation Book Club, and I was only able to attend two of those. But those are some examples of the book club atmosphere, but I would really say that that there are other kinds of book clubs. But the majority of the ones that majority of my book club experiences have been with kind of that stereotypical, and is a stereotype stereotypical demographic of white women reading, and that's definitely where some of my contentions and also hopes come from.

Jess 14:01

Mmhmm, yeah I could see how coming out of that particular book club background would present to you certain paths about thinking about the book club context, even while you're also working to work against the stereotypes of the particular book clubs you've come out of. When you said something about, I don't know, real people reading books, it reminded me of how as I've said to you like I just joined a book club for the first time in my life this year, and it's like given me permission to be a real person reading books. Like that sounds really gross, as if I thought I was just like an academic like high on my horse, but that's not true at all. I actually think I had sort of boxed myself in to -- damagingly, to myself -- to certain ways of thinking about books and reading. And so even when I read for for leisure, so to speak, complicated phrase, even when I did that I was still always boxing myself in into this way of reading that might not have been the way that I actually want to read. So, reading in this Alice Munro book club that I've been part of has sort of given me the permission to just be a real person who reads books, which means I can just come to the book club and be like "I didn't like that. I did like that. I hated that character." Nothing needs to like be behind that other than my feelings and a lot of my reading at book club is therefore different from the kinds that I've learned in academia, that have to me felt a little bit restrictive sometimes have boxed me in. And that's probably partly just myself -- it's not like anyone's standing over my shoulder when I'm reading saying like, "No, you must read that through the lens of this theory!" But in my head I've been sort of, I think, boxed in to use particular interpretive practices that now I feel freed from a little bit. So actually my book club experience has been quite like freeing or like, it has liberated me.

Rebecca 15:43

And I actually... one of the things I was thinking about when we were going to discuss this book in the context of book clubs was about how like I originally read this book when I was looking for books to put together a dissertation proposal. So it was automatically, "does this book work with my theories?" And then when I sat down to talk about it with, with a book club, realizing there were so many things in the book I missed, partly because of that, which is kind of like, it's a little sad. But, but it was also partly because I knew who had written on it, so it's like Larissa Lai talks about Hiromi Goto in *The Slanting I*, so automatically I read this book and then I'm going to read what she says. That's not that you shouldn't read what she says, actually awesome context for the book, and that's not I'm not saying you shouldn't read it, but I'm saying, I didn't do any, how am I reacting to this book?" In the middle, I did very little of that and that's actually -- maybe this is idealistic of me -- but I don't, I actually think something's lost in the academic conversation if I just jump to what all the academics have said about it and haven't stopped to go "How am I responding to this book?" because that says something about the work the book is doing, if I take that time to look at the book in relation to me before I go and find out what all the official people have said.

Jess 18:34

Yeah that's that's very relatable. Like I just feel like academia has been this sort of transformation for me from... I always would do that for sure like I would read a book for school, and then I would go and see

what everybody "more official," like you said, had to say about it because certainly I could not have an original idea first! Like I wouldn't prioritize my own thoughts and ideas and reactions to the book. And then, growing out of that and realizing that, like, "oh no shit I have my own thoughts before I even enter the scholarly conversation!" which is its own important process, to enter that conversation if you're in academia, before I even do that I actually do have my own thoughts. I can be an official person, too!

Rebecca 19:18

Yeah, yeah.

Jess 19:20

I was just gonna say: you already kind of started talking about this book in relation to the book club. So did you want to say a little bit about the book and how you came to read the book in this book club that you're a part of?

Rebecca 19:30

Sure. So, um, oh gosh, I've practiced summarizing this book several times and it's quite difficult, so. Okay, so here's here's my attempt.

Jess 19:43

Great.

Rebecca 19:44

So, the story is about a potentially nameless -- I can come back to that later -- um, pronounless narrator, it's written in the first-person, who has become pregnant or believes they have come pregnant with a baby of a Kappa which is a Japanese water sprite. The only thing is that this pregnancy never comes to fruition. The only evidence of it is the narrator's feeling in their own body of another presence and movement, sometimes not even in their uterus, elsewhere in their body. And they've also been diagnosed with a hysterical pregnancy because of this. And this narrator is the second child of four children of parents who immigrated from Japan to BC, had very limited temporary work there, and the father was able to buy a farm, somehow, in Alberta, where he decides he's going to be the first person to grow Japanese rice on the prairies, very dry and windblown windswept climate. The father is also emotionally and physically abusive. And so part of the narration narrator's journey throughout the book is also the memories that are coming up for them about their childhood and abuse in their relationship with their father, who they also really admire at the same time as he is abusive. And trying to manage their relationship with their sisters, all of whom are dealing with trauma in their own ways, and their relationship with their mother, who they have perceived as very weak at different times. Spaced out

throughout the novel, there are these short sections that appear to be the Kappa talking -- they have a baby talking, so it begins with an egg and grows to a fetus and is moving around in the body and having their own existential thoughts about what it means to be an egg and in relationship to sisters.

Rebecca 21:50

The narrator is quite self-deprecating, you could say very low self-esteem, describes themselves as extremely ugly in these very vivid ways, like with sausage fingers and a pumpkin head and pumpkin teeth and square body and and talks passingly about suicide, "but I would never talk about that, I would never think about that." Very self-deprecating, not easy to pin down what they really think. At the same time, this narrator is immensely delighted in the things they delight in. So you have, they wear pajamas all the time because that's what fits their body and they feel good about that. And they have pajamas for all occasions, and they are impregnated by the Kappa because they insist on going to see the lunar eclipse, and won't go with anybody who doesn't fully embrace the idea of it though their friends aren't really interested in it. And so this Kappa appears to them, seemingly out of nowhere, and they Sumo wrestle together which is, I guess, what you do with a Kappa and end up pregnant. So there's this immense creativity and delight alongside this self-deprecation of the narrator through this journey as they search for connection to other people, with their sisters, search for romantic love as well. And I guess the other element of the story is there are Kappa stories throughout the narration that the parents tell. I guess that would be the gist of the novel. There's a lot going on.

Jess 23:30

It's such a complex, complicated novel that goes forward and back in time, like flashbacks to the narrator's youth. There is that other narrative voice, like you said, that seems to be the Kappa child speaking or expressing itself through thought or that sort of thing. Like it's so complex and so everything.... I'm just really impressed by the summary because it's so hard to encapsulate in, you know, in a few sentences for sure.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

Jess 24:10

Do I remember correctly that you chose this book for your book club? Like this was your pick?

Rebecca 24:16

Yes it was. It was my pick. And it's actually the so much going on in the novel that kind of made me pick it. So I'll give some context, I've been very bad picking books or not even novels, like, because

sometimes you read things that aren't novels. So like for example I chose *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back* for book club. Because I like, I, I love that book, and it was very eye opening for me and this is a group that definitely approaches reading as a learning about what it means, learning about being in the world, learning about what it means to be a citizen in Canada or... what, there's definitely an idea of we're doing this to learn. And, and I thought this this is a great book about that, that could help with that. And, and, but it has footnotes, and it's not that people didn't like it, people liked it, but it was a lot of work, understandably, and I'm going right... I read like this all day every day. This book actually seems more accessible than like Derrida or something. Because there are footnotes that explain. And then I also chose *Green Grass, Running Water*, thinking this won Canada Reads, and then the discussion around that was, "So can you explain it to us? Like this is the kind of book that I'd love to read in a class." And fair enough. Like, so I'm not like fair enough. I have to Google 9 million things to understand what's going on in *Green Grass, Running Water*, but I am excited to do that i'm also... that's also my work, so I have time to do that. That's not the same as I'm reading on the side of other things. And so I was really struggling for to find a book that would prompt questions, because part of what I had hoped about *Green Grass, Running Water* part of what I find excited about that book is the questions that come up, like, why is Susanna Moody getting off a bus? Like what? But needing it to also be accessible and so. And again, it sounds condescending when I say that, but I would perceive this as just coming from different interpretive practices, and from different atmospheres. And so,

Jess 26:41

Oh no, I even think about that with myself like what books are more accessible or less accessible to me, absolutely. So totally and also for students and it's not something that's just applicable outside of academia like it's...

Rebecca 26:52

Makes sense. Yeah. And so one of the things that I I continually felt like I was bumping up against in a book club context, in particular when we're reading to learn about social... like this idea of I'm going to read and learn about someone else so that I know more about a real social situation, and doing that through fiction, is that we would get stuck in ruts, I think. And in particular this rut has to do with.... I would describe it as having to do with the emotion of the book. So you go in knowing I'm going to read about a hard topic, it's going to be hard, and you feel it, you read about it, you learn about the hard or bad things that happened, and that's the work. The work is reading the book and feeling it and then we might, in a book club, discuss how horrible it is, how awful it is, and maybe get to the point of discussing how that relates to our lives but sometimes not, or some... And feeling like that sometimes results in not doing justice to the book as a literary work that is actually in and of itself evidence of creativity and resilience and looking for different ways of being in the world, being in community, and in particular when you're in a group, a book club group where everyone is coming from the same relatively privileged position, trying to read about someone else. But your empathy is maybe being expressed more as pity and finding myself caught up in that too. And looking for books that I thought maybe could just turn the conversation in a different direction, almost like if we read a different book maybe I'll be a more effective person in the conversation.

Rebecca 28:46

Um, and so *The Kappa Child* was one of those books I turned to, and the reason was because it has that narrative that you could read... right, if it was on its own, you could read the story of family immigrates from Japan to Canada, doesn't have access to work, doesn't have access to supports. There's abuse in the family. There's not access to what the family needs the, everyone's dealing with the trauma and the outfall of that and the narrator's moving on to find relationships. You could read that story in there, except -- and it is there -- except it is there alongside a narrator who is so both self-deprecating but also delightful and delighted and has like almost this cosmic agency to like get pregnant under a lunar eclipse with a mystical creature.

Rebecca 29:42

So, I hope my hope was that we could both talk about things like Japanese internment are mentioned in the book, racism and homophobia, pathologizing individuals based on whether it's queerness or based on experiences of trauma -- that some of those things can come up, but not let us get into this like pity rut of discussion. And, um, I would say that for the most part, that was successful and that's why that's why I want to talk about this book because I was excited by the ways this combination of like delight, and what we this narrative that sometimes turns to pity, work together I think to turn us back to the literary-ness of the book and asking more questions about what's going on in the text as something that is working in the world.

Jess 30:41

It seems to me like what you're saying is like the choice of book actually does, it's not like book clubs or your book club experience is.... It's not like it's the same every single time when you have the same group, like it's always going to be the same the same dynamic. It sounds to me like what you're saying is there's some power in the choice of book and that books, actually, the choice of book can lead you towards different path, would you say, or is that almost overstating it?

Rebecca 31:07

I would say I would say it's almost overstating it. Like it's kind of was like my last hope was like if I can choose a book that bridges, different ways of reading -- so bridges like the affective approach of "I feel sad and delight at the same time," so it's through the feelings of this book, I can be led to a kind of confusion that leads me to ask more questions that that might work. But I would also say, like, one of your questions was what makes a good book club book.

Jess 31:39

Yeah.

Rebecca 31:40

And I, I guess, I'm a little stressed I'm struck by what you said because when I was thinking about that question, I was like well it doesn't matter what you read, it matters how you read it. And, um, but I totally was turning to I, I was feeling so stuck, that I was like okay well maybe I just need to choose something different. So I think it can, like it's my hope my hope is that we can read different things differently but there's always the risk. I think the the stamp of "This isn't a good book" is the like cutting off -- like that's just an end to the discussion.

Jess 32:20

Mm hmm. Yeah, I agree that's. It's kind of an unhelpful conversation but I imagine that that probably happens quite a bit in book clubs -- you have way more experience than I do with them. The reason why I wanted to follow up on that portion of your, what you had just said though is because I've been thinking about this matter of whether the book matters in a book club or not. Like you just said that your, your approach is generally like the book doesn't matter, it matters how you read it. But the reason I've been thinking about this is because in my Alice Munro book club where we're only reading Alice Munro, there's been a lot of discussion about how Munro's writing in particular is fostering more complex, complicated discussions in our book club, so I'm that's people's views, and in fact I've been caught up in those views myself and I've said that like oh yeah I think there's something really complex about her worldview, where she doesn't sort of reduce things to good or bad. There's a lot of moral complexity in her writing, and I think that's fostering a different dynamic in the book club and other folks have definitely said that in the, in the book club. And so that's something I've been thinking about is, is there certain books that lend themselves to particular book club contexts or not? And I guess it's the same as teaching and learning -- like some people say there are unteachable texts, but I have a feeling that you might disagree with that, given what you have just said is that, maybe there's just ways to approach a text differently so that it becomes a text that can foster conversation, perhaps. But I know that I've heard, growing up in academia I've heard many times, "This is an unteachable text," like for different books out there. So that's why I was asking you that, in short, just because I'm curious about the, the real significance of the books themselves to the conversations that happen around them in book clubs or elsewhere.

Rebecca 34:06

Well, I do wonder like... So if I'm thinking about this part of what both of the book clubs I read this book with were white, middle-class book clubs, women. And part of what I liked, so I guess part of what I'm saying is, it's the book but then it's probably also the book playing off the context right? So part of what I actually found so what was interesting, or I thought took us out of some of our interpretive patterns of the book was the way people react responded to different, some of the strange parts in the book suddenly we just begin with the Kappa -- like what is a Kappa? Right?

Jess 34:47

Yeah tell me more about all of that, all these details.

Rebecca 34:49

Yes. So, like, so for example, needing to Google what a Kappa is, and like this happened to me too. So when I read the book for the first time, I'm like "Kappa" I've heard of that before -- It's in Harry Potter! Like, that's my frame of reference. And so, anyway so people had a context for what a Kappa is based on their children and grandchildren having read Harry Potter. So, that's interesting. But then if you Google it, and people did this right, "what's a Kappa," then you're suddenly exposed to... Oh my gosh, in Japan, there's a huge, there's tons of pop culture references to Kappa. There is, besides like the folklore, this is actually a thing. This is a big thing. So part of what I liked about that is it suddenly like, Oh, this isn't just about me reading as a Canadian in a Canadian context about someone who's had an experience of being Canadian different than mine. It's this is also participating in a transnational narrative in a different... And so whether you understand that narrative or not, you at least get the, like, it was interesting to me to have people reacting and saying like, I had no idea. Just, that's a simple like out of my context thing, but at least it you know gets us out of what is often a national like little bubble of how reading is done, so that that was exciting to me. And then one of the things that was exciting was someone brought, and I should have looked this up so I could speak to it more clearly a blog written by someone who had when they were looking up Kappa came across someone who was blogging about their own love of Harry Potter -- this is before everything that's currently going on with [Rowling and Harry Potter] -- love of Harry Potter, and, but her use of an idea from a southern American Indigenous group, a group in the southern United States, in her like in the online Harry Potter stuff. And so this was someone responding to like, "hey I love Harry Potter but I'm really not comfortable with you using a piece of my culture." And that was interesting for me because then suddenly I was like this, this is really interesting. Now we're going off on the use of Kappa and what does that mean. So, I was excited by that conversation, that was actually the first thing that happened because the first thing I asked about was what do people know about Kappa? Is is this something you're familiar with?

Jess 34:58

I was just gonna say and that's its own kind of labor right? Like I think earlier, in my notes here that I just wrote as you were talking, you're talking about the worry that like reading becomes the work, like if you're reading to learn and you just in the ruts that you got into in your book club, if I can say that? It ended up being like just reading is simply the work that we must do, but if you're reading but also doing sort of side research, that at least seems to add on to the work, so to speak, like maybe like Dion Brand's struggle work, I know Joanne Leow talked about this in another episode of the podcast, the idea of reading as labor, but then also the other labor that needs to go into that in order to possibly make real so social change. Well, Googling I think would be considered probably by many people a passive kind of less... yeah, just a more passive form of labor. To me I think there's still radical possibilities in just the simple act of looking things up and access to information. But yeah that sounds to me like another whole layer of labor on top of the labor of reading that's happening in your book club.

Rebecca 38:28

Yeah. And so that's like, and I'm not saying like I do not claim that this leads to social change. But I am talking about like just getting out of interpretive ruts as like a step. And it probably has to do with the context in which I'm reading, in which I'm doing this reading. But actually where I found, like the most productive was the Little House on the Prairie references in the book.

Jess 38:56

Yes, I was so -- I wanted you to talk about that! Like, yes!

Rebecca 39:00

Yeah, so in a book club context, and I'm speaking for myself here too having grown up with the Little House books, that actually one of the things I so valued about our conversation around this book is that because there was this Little House narrative where the -- I'll explain that a bit --

Jess 39:16

Yes please

Rebecca 39:17

for people who haven't read the book. So the narrator's book throughout, favorite book, which they actually carry with them as they move to the prairies is Little House on the Prairie, and they like, hold it in their shirt. And they have dreams in which they are Laura, and the relationship between Laura and Mary is really mirrored in the difficult relationship the narrator has with their older sister Slither, who's beautiful and "the good one," but also the weak one and.. And they're continually comparing, as a child, their relationship between what's going on for their family and what happens when Laura's family moves to the prairies. So that includes like, well, Pa would never hit Ma, but like i don't know maybe he would. And there's a moment when... So one of the traumatic and difficult things to the narrator is that when they're sleeping all in the same room, their parents have sex, which is not only disturbing but it's also disturbing because their father is so abusive to their mother. And the narrator has a moment of, well Laura's family lived in a log cabin. She must have experienced that. But at the same time, Laura becomes quite a grotesque figure at different points, and is emaciated and walks out of the television as a ghost at one point - that's like, I forget the name of the actress who plays Laura in the Little House television show. That was a little before my growing-up time. And I.. So, the prairie narrative is troubled, like this idea of pioneering and prairie narrative is troubled, and that was such a good distraction from focusing on the pity, the potential ability to pity this narrator who's like maybe delusional. Instead, like going, "Okay, but I love Little House on the Prairie. Yeah, no I haven't read that in however many years, probably doesn't read the same today as it did when I was 10. What would happen if I went back to read

that?" And so, almost how this this narrative of this, the narrative within the book, where they're using Little House on the Prairie as a way to interact and understand their own experience, and as a comforting thing but also the text the Little House text becomes increasingly troubled, and people bringing up how difficult that is and encountering their own like... that was something I easily accepted. So it's almost as though this diasporic text became a text about settler colonialism, in our in our reading discussions and because people were so emotionally attached to Laura and Little House on the Prairie. So, that was an awesome emotional distraction from our reading patterns and it worked on an emotional level, right? People weren't going at this from, "Now I'm going to talk about the allusions to Little House on the Prairie in the book." It was, "I emotionally responded to this because it is a part of my growing-up experience." And then that led to questions and discussion, and in book club you normally don't come out with like a thesis statement in the end, but that's the work partly right? Like sometimes I wonder if our thesis statements are more about like our academic position "See I came up with a thesis statement."

Jess 42:28

Oh god yes.

Rebecca 42:28

The thesis statement isn't the work. The work is the coming up with a thesis statement. Right. And so, I was, I was excited by that.

Jess 42:59

The Little House on the Prairie stuff I was really hoping you'd bring that up because not only is it a text I grew up with, like I said, it's also... it's such a powerful intertext in the in the novel, as you said, and obviously gripped your book club members, and I thought, like this kind of just echoes what you're saying but I thought the narrator's working out, like hard working out of their relationship with that text -- Little House on the Prairie -- kind of, especially in terms of relatability versus unreliability, like or what they feel is similar between them and Laura, and what they feel is not similar between them and Laura's experience of the prairie, all of that sounds like what's also happening, to some degree, in either in your book club or in the reading practices that a lot of us take towards books, right? This sort of back-and-forth between a text and ourselves thinking what in here is seeing me and I see it, and what in here is unfamiliar to me? So that microcosm that we see in the text of the narrator working out their relationship to this text and this key figure Laura Ingalls, seems to me as kind of like a broader... I don't know, it says something more about the larger interpretive practices that we use to figure out texts and to have our own emotional responses to text.

Rebecca 44:15

Yeah, and I think too if we're talking about like, not wanting to invalidate like personal reading practices while still be critical of them, like the work the narrator is doing is very very personal right about their own relationship to life and to their family. And so, yeah I like the way those two things are held together in the text. A downfall of the way we were reading and the way the discussion went definitely was that some of, like for example the discussion of Little House on the Prairie like... wanting to make sure that we don't lose also the discussion of the racism and homophobia that the narrator experiences. So definitely the narrator's struggle and self deprecation kept coming up and what do we really make of that? There was quite a long discussion about are they really contemplating suicide. Yeah. Another interesting thing was just people had their phones out and we were trying to Google some of the Japanese sayings, which Google in translation... I had asked a friend who speaks Japanese about a couple things. But Google translator is only so good, but that in and of itself is like sitting together doing a stroke of work going, "Okay none of us understand Japanese, none of us speak Japanese, so what does that mean?" to like not just skim over it, you know.

Jess 45:41

And to go to Google and have this like insufficient response come back to you! Like it's such a like, just reading that metaphorically is interesting like thinking about how you're attempting to do like labor beyond reading, but then getting, not a perfect sort of polished result coming back to you, which is such a good metaphor for the labor of reading and the "reading towards social change" -- I guess people can't see my scare quotes, "reading for social change," -- that it doesn't just like, it's not like pop in a book and out pops social change, right? It's and like you said that's the premise of basically your, your work around reading and social change. So, but that Google translate example seems to like metaphor metaphorize -- is that a word? -- make that metaphorical in some way.

Jess 46:30

Yeah. So do you have other examples that you wanted to share, or?

Rebecca 46:35

Well there are things that I just didn't, like I appreciated the some of the questions, how honest people were about their confusion about some points of the book, without getting the like, which I had a bit of with Green Grass, Running Water, "Tom King's better than this. Why isn't he explaining it more clearly?" That didn't really happen with this book, which is interesting. I think it was just that much more accessible because there was a through narrative.

Rebecca 47:05

But things like the youngest sister barking like a dog. And it's one thing when she's just barking like a dog, it's another thing when the younger sister chased after a ghost snarling and barking like a dog and it says her "hackles" -- is that the word? -- were raised on the back, and it's like... okay is this actually a sister? I think it is because they ride their bike. But is this a dog or is it a sister or is a dog? I don't.. I'm not sure. Right, so, like and those are funny moments, they relieve the tension of other... But, but people really wondering and looking through the book going, where's the evidence, right? Where's the evidence that says that this is a person or dog? And the same with the alien abductions. I'm not sure I mentioned this yet: the mother is abducted by aliens, maybe!

Jess 47:51

Right like I don't know what is what is true or not in this book, and I'm not concerned with that, of course, I know like, because of my own reading practices that I'm not there to like, you know, find the truth or whatever with my magnifying glass, but I am aware that this is this almost... This book felt like a fever dream in some ways. Like I'm like what was real? What was not real? The boundaries between real and not real are definitely played with.

Rebecca 48:15

Right. And I think that's actually part of... so in a reading practice where you're reading a book to learn about people like this person in this book and their really experience, I think that's part of the book's potential right? Is it's like, I don't know what's real or not real in this book and I'm going to choose to trust that this narrator, who is incredibly confusing, is communicating their experience.

Jess 48:39

Yeah, it like destabilizes the very pursuit of definite knowledge, which is so perfect for a book club, perhaps, or for other contexts too where you're trying to pin down something or trying to pin down knowledge about someone else.

Rebecca 48:54

Yeah. No, and I think and so that at the end of the book there's this.... I think this mirrors the conclusion the narrator has to get to, who is also unsure about their mother's experience and their sister's experience and their own experience. The narrator has to come to, at least as I interpret it, an understanding and acceptance that other people have experiences different than them. So their sister, their older sister who they don't get along with that well in childhood, has gone to counseling has a partner has a life that the narrator doesn't even know about, and that older sister is telling the narrator you need to accept that our mother does believe she's being abducted by aliens and has found friends and community who accept that and it's good for her. You're going to need to accept that. It's good for

her. So it's not a permission to accept the father's abuse as an okay thing, or the ways in which the narrator is very lonely because their way of being in the world is not accepted, rather it's, at least as I read the book, partly an acceptance that people do experience the world differently, and if it's working for them, they're not hurting anyone else, right, how do we be in relationship? And I think that's part of what the narrator is struggling with.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

Rebecca 50:17

I do think book clubs can get stuck in ruts of reading the same text, so variety can be good, but when I was thinking about this question, the real thing... the main thing I was thinking about was the situations I've been in where, like I've actually seen people leave book clubs, often after... Like it's one thing to leave a book club, it's another thing to leave a book club after your book hasn't been like was kind of "naynayed" kind of thing like... That's not good. Um, and so just wondering about how personal it is. Like and I, you think about this when you like recommend a movie to someone and then you go like, did I mean to recommend that movie? So when people bring books to a book club setting it's often because they're personal, right? It's not the same as when you teach is I get to teach this book, I know half the class will hate it, but that's not the point. Right? Or maybe I don't like this book, but I'm going to teach it because it's important historically for this reason. But people often choose books that are very personal to them. And then, when people in the book club don't recognize the value of the book, but it's done important work for you, that's very personal for people. And I actually think that that's one of the ways like... I wish that there was a way to make that experience visible on a larger reading industry scale, because I think that's also what happens right? So if white women are the main force in the reading industry in terms of their buying power, and what is catered to and tastes, what does that mean about what is expressed and popularized in literature about many other people's experiences? So, I guess I'm where I'm going with this is less about what makes a good book club selection, though I think diversity is a good idea in every sense in terms of what you're reading and who's writing it, and that the atmosphere in which you're reading I actually think is really important. So, instead of asking, is this a good book or not a good book? You can say you don't like the book, but there's a difference between I don't like the book and this is not a good book. I'm not going to say this isn't a good book. Right? I'm going to discuss what's going on with this book and be interested as to why other people like it, or interested as to why other people see value or importance in that book, and that that being more important than what a book selection is chosen.

Jess 52:40

Yeah, that's, that's, I think this is such a, it feels to me just as a book club newbie like a uncharted sort of maybe or unspoken-about like thing where it's like the feelings that can be hurt from when you bring this book that's maybe beloved to you into a book club and you're like, Okay guys, here you go! And it's

like that moment when you are showing a friend a movie you really love and you have to stare at them because you're like, "do they love it too??" But and then the crushing feeling that can happen when people don't respond to the book in the same way you do because it's sort of like sharing a part of yourself. So yeah that's such an awesome thing to bring up here because of course those, those personal feelings reactions that we might want to kind of submerge sometimes -- I know certainly I sometimes try to like play it cool if I'm too eager about something -- those can inform the dynamics of the group. It can inform whether you stay in or leave a group. It can inform the community practices -- like, oh, what if you notice that somebody's feelings were hurt? Maybe the next time you totally do something different or you now treat that person more preciously. Like these are all things that to me seem to go a little bit unspoken or maybe aren't explicitly talked about, maybe they are in your book club, but definitely not seem to have a huge impact on the dynamics of the group and the dynamics of the reading that happens, so I'm really glad that you brought that up.

Rebecca 54:01

And I think like, it doesn't mean you don't point out problems in books right? At all. It's just, yeah, when people are reacting and valuing books based on their emotional value, just have to keep that in mind, and that is often the person who has the individual, more personal experience, right, who has that, right? So.

Jess 54:22

Mhmm. When you're reading a book that comes from your community, let's say, or from like the exact place and people that you grew up with, that can be that can create tensions, and that can create like eagerness and enthusiasm in ways that maybe we wouldn't see from book club picks that we're detached from.

Rebecca 54:40

Yeah.

Jess 54:41

Yeah, so: this is something we've talked about quite a bit along the way, and I know your research focuses a lot on this kind of thing, but I wanted to ask you about -- again, I guess I feel like again we've talked about this -- but I did want to ask you about the possibilities, or maybe the limitations of book clubs as teaching and learning contexts.

Rebecca 55:03

So I think the main limitation in many ways is the way they can end up like echo chambers in particular if everyone's from similar backgrounds. Regardless of what you're reading you might read it all the same way. And then we're not moving anywhere, or you might be learning some things, but there's limitations on that. But I do think and I guess we did touch on this, the main possibility, I think, is the ability to be vulnerable. And I absolutely think we need spaces like that in order for our learning to not be so laborious for other people. So I think that's a good possibility.

Rebecca 55:43

But I think when I also think there is -- and this is branching out, maybe this is too big theoretically for what our discussion today -- but in a settler-colonial Canadian context like, to be aware that this idea that we create community from books is like a very old long-standing colonial practice. And like I mean Fanon says it very clearly that when the colonial state is challenged everyone will turn to Western culture, like, and there is something glaring about that that's where, "I see a problem in the world, I'm going to read a book." Well, that's nice, but the land, access to resources, right to practice your culture, right to exist -- those are the issues, not whether you've read a book or not. And so like that's... I don't know, for me that's haunting underneath all our reading practices. When we're reading for social change, that to me is underneath there and to be aware of. And I haven't quite found ways to discuss necessarily with people in different contexts, because that's not to say reading isn't personal work and reading can't be transformative. And at the same time that's not to say that people like Daniel Heath Justice aren't saying Indigenous Literatures Matter because Indigenous lives matter right? But that's a different kind of community that's being formed. And so how do you hold those things in tension, that reading provides a space if your voice if your experience is not being held within what is being called the Canadian community, that literatures can provide a space where alternative communities can grow and hear each other and support each other and perhaps lead to working for change. And that, that also needs to be held in tension with this like long-standing practice of building national culture through reading, and through imagining that in reading about this other person, I am enacting my citizenship.

Jess 57:56

Mmhmm. Like the Benedict Anderson thing like, that you know that whole portion of his book *Imagined Communities* is about print culture and how those ideas circulate through print, and yet at the same time and you're sort of holding this complexity, for us, but at the same time, you know storytelling, as a far longer, what's the word earlier, a far earlier process, a far earlier practice of relationality and community-building from Indigenous folks who have been on these lands for time immemorial and for other folks. So storytelling as a community-building practice that has always been around, but print and nationalism and books and reading, reading as a white settler. Yeah, all of those things are doing something maybe a little bit different, or...

Rebecca 58:44

Yeah for me I think it has to do with what... So if I am looking for if I have had an experience, and I am looking for community, if I look... if I've had an experience that seems to be outside of, or that isn't being acknowledged, and I find in a book, I find community, I find other people reading that book, and telling their stories being inspired to tell their stories by reading that book, that has a resistance to it right? And I think that does have an ability to create change. But I think I guess, and I'm saying this tentatively I haven't totally thought it through, but I do think there's a difference between that and I'm going to learn about someone else through a book without any real necessarily any real acknowledgement of my relationship or positionality in relation to the subject I'm reading about. And that's more where I'm seeing, I think there's a lot of assumptions in there.

Jess 59:47

Totally. I just actually read a piece about this, and I'll put it in the show notes because I can't remember the title of it, but it was a piece coming out of, out of all of the reading lists and the book clubs that have come out of George Floyd's murder and resulting increases and and increased visibility of racial justice and protests for racial racial justice, but this is published in October 2020, and the writer was saying like all of this just reduces these really complex systemic racial capitalist issues into "self work," self work, it's always about self work. And so yeah I think that I'll put the link to that in the show notes, and that that seems to be what you're, you're hesitant about is this idea that through reading, that is the work of learning about another person, that self work, when there's actually larger things to keep in mind.

Rebecca 1:00:43

I was gonna say there was kind of an explosion of articles and explorations of that I think over the past year, which is interesting while so many of us were at home doing self work.

Jess 1:00:53

Mmhmm. Literally, yeah, I mean oh gosh we haven't even brought up the idea of like how book clubs have changed during COVID and the self work and the reading work that's doing that's changing during COVID.

I did want to make sure I asked like... So we've talked about The Kappa Child in relation to book, book clubs in your book club, but do you think or maybe you've already seen this happen, and maybe you've done it yourself, how do you think The Kappa Child translates to sort of traditional teaching and learning contexts? Like can you see it working well in undergrad in an undergraduate literature class?

Rebecca 1:01:27

I yeah actually I think one of the... I will use my brother as an example here, as a non-professional reader example, who I very much admire. But he so my brother reads a lot of Neil Gaiman, that kind of thing.

And so like I was trying to get him a book that like somehow remotely intersects with what I do and so I got him Eden Robinson's *Son of a Trickster*, thinking that he's not, he also lives out west. So some of these uses of fantasy, but then also similar genre elements, but then also grounded actually where he close to where he lives would be interesting. And I think that *The Kappa Child* would also fit into that. So thinking about undergraduate students who read a lot of fantasy that this would be a way in to some other discussions. I also think there is enough critical work on it that you could bring in some critical discussion. So I do I do think *The Kappa Child* would provide some would would work in a traditional learning class and I also think it brings some questions up about.... I mean I have some unanswered questions about the ending of the book and in particular the relationship with Gerald that comes up in terms of what is the relationship to the land and what is the relationship to Indigenous presence at the end of the book. I I'm not really sure. I think those would be great conversations to have in in a class at the end of the book, about the end of the book, and I would welcome that. So, but I do think that you're approaching it differently in a classroom because I think it's a different strategy of learning from a book. In the book club context, I was kind of hoping and relying on us going at the book affectively: what is your personal effective experience of the book? And that leading to questions and not that that doesn't have a place in the classroom, but in the classroom in a way, I wouldn't in a book club, it would be "So, Larissa Lai says this about the book, Nancy Kang says this about the book, I saw this review of the book, how does it relate to this other concept," right? It's a different way of learning. Yeah.

Jess 1:03:38

And that actually does get into a question I had for you more personally, and we did talk about this a little bit already, but do you feel like there's like a switch in you that switches from PhD reading to bookclub reading or leisure reader, casual reader to professional reader? We've been using these terms a few times throughout our conversation, and I know we probably both think of them as very unstable terms and we're not using them like we're not investing in them fully, but I did want to ask you just because of my own experiences like I told you I kind of have built up within myself this academic reader who doesn't read in a way that I probably naturally want to. So I'm wondering if you have that sort of similar things that similar process like, do you have... Do you notice the differences in the ways that you read or the interpretive strategies you have between being a PhD candidate in literature, being a book club reader, or other reading roles?

Rebecca 1:04:32

I don't if I if it's a book I haven't read before, I don't take notes when I read for a book club.

Jess 1:04:41

I'm laughing just because your face almost looked like you were like revealing a secret or something

Rebecca 1:04:47

Okay but then other people at the book club do! Every book club -- like because there's three that I've attended fairly regularly -- do, and I often feel like I'm the person that's going "I don't have a page number for this," everyone else has a page number, but it's like it's, it's actually part of enjoyment for me right? I'm not gonna take notes, because it's so much work to take notes, I do it all the time. And so that's part of the enjoyment, not taking notes. So I do when I'm reading for a book club choose to experience a book partly so I can engage in the conversation. Because if I haven't if I've just analyzed the book, I haven't given credence to the part of myself that actually can and does read in the way other people in the room are reading. So, yeah so it is a different way of reading. And I think I didn't say this, but I do think we need to be cognizant of the fact that, like things like Canada Reads, like book clubs are really modeled for us, Oprah, like this isn't this isn't a neutral, out of nowhere, thing. This is something that is marketed and modeled. And so just being aware of that. And I mean, Daniel Coleman's concept of wry civility really gets at that, though he's not talking specifically to book clubs, I do think we do need a certain amount of wry civility, without throwing out the validation that literature does produce emotional responses in readers and that's okay that's part of books' magic.

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[Music: "Homer Said"]

Jess 1:06:29

This episode was recorded on Treaty 6 territory and the homeland of the Métis. In March, 2021, the Saskatchewan Library Association is putting on the 5th annual One Book One Province book club or reading challenge of sorts. And this year's reading challenge or book club or project features the book *Blanket Toss under Midnight Sun* by Saskatoon-based, Willow Cree author, Paul Seesequasis. The SLA website describes the program as one that quote "aims to increase literacy and to create a reading culture by providing opportunities for residents to become more socially engaged in their community through a shared story." So of course this piqued my interest at this particular time and for this particular episode because this seems to be a program or an example of something that's trying to read for social change, with all of the complexities and complications and probably troubles that that practice comes with. So I'm really interested to see how this month goes and to check out the conversations that will happen around the book. And speaking of the book, Seesequasis's book *Blanket Toss under Midnight Sun* emerges from his social media project initially Indigenous Archival Photo Project, which he started a few years ago, and his initial reason for the project he says, was to seek and create a quote "visual record of a positive framing of Indigenous peoples," end quote. And that comes from an APTN news story that I will put in the show notes. The book highlights some of these photos and stories that he collected from this, you know, initial social media project from across eight Indigenous communities in North America. If you want to participate in One Book One Province, I will put the link to the readings and the discussions that the Sask Library Association is putting on this month in the show notes. You can order the book from your favorite local bookstore, but also through Paul Seesequasis's website, which I will link to in the show notes, you can send a copy of the book to someone who is incarcerated. He has a

sort of form and a method for doing that on his website, and you can also make a contribution on his site to support the Indigenous Archival Photo Project, as he continues to work on it.

Jess 1:08:55

Thank you to Dyalla Swain for the podcast music. You can find more of their work at soundcloud.com/dyallas. Thank you to Jade McDougal at muskrat-hands.com for the awesome podcast graphics. You can follow the podcast on Twitter and Instagram at @teachinbookspod, no g, or get in touch via email at teachinbookspod@gmail.com. You can use the hashtag #TeachinBooksPod if you want to talk about the podcast, still not sure if that's necessary, but I continue to say it sometimes, not all the time. And what else, um, I guess you can rate and review, I mean that would be great if you can rate and review this podcast, if you like it, on Apple podcasts or wherever you're able to do so. All right, good bye for now, but please join me again next week on Teachin' Books.

[Music: "Homer Said"]

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