

Best Book Club with Shanna and Jen Podcast
Season 1, Episode 19 - May 5, 2021

The Women's Prize for Fiction Shortlist

Shanna: Hello Everyone and Welcome to the best book club podcast, I'm Shanna

Jen: And I'm Jen

Shanna: And Today we are talking about the Women's Prize for Fiction shortlist which was just announced on April 28th. We did an episode where we talked all about the women's prize itself and went over all sixteen books that made the long list so go check that one out if you haven't already. I will link it in the show notes.

Jen: We also did an Instagram Live last week where we both made our predictions as to which books would make it to this round. You can find that video on our Instagram if you're interested in a live in person perspective of us!

Shanna: I think I got it all right?! Except, you know, that I only picked 5 books because apparently I don't know how to count all the way to 6. But hey, I did pretty good so go me.

Jen: I had a hard time separating which I thought were going to make it and which I just wanted to make it but looking at my list, I guess I didn't do too bad! I did predict four of the six. The two that I chose that didn't make were Burnt Sugar and Detransition, Baby. Which I'm actually so bummed about.

Shanna: I will still read Detransition, Baby for you eventually. So don't be too sad.

Jen: Okay good. I won't be too sad. For book club in June, we all get to put a book in the hat by an LGBTQ author for Pride month. If no one has read it by then, maybe I will put it in and maybe it will get drawn and then everyone will have to read it. I'm not sure if everyone will like it though, but I do think it would be a really great discussion.

Shanna: The sixteen books that made up the longlist have been whittled down to just six books for the shortlist.

Jen: Between the two of us we managed to read eleven of the longlisted books which were all the ones that we *could* read. When we decided to read all of these books as part of our reading goals for the year, neither of us realized going in how many titles were not actually going to be available to us here in Canada! I just assumed that all the books up for the prize, would, you know, be released. Like, everywhere I mean.

Shanna: UNFORTUNATELY for me, I mostly guessed books that I hadn't read. I know, that barely makes any sense, but I followed my guts. Luckily, Jen has read the majority of them so we are not completely lost at sea. Well, I kind of am, but that's how I live my life baby. I have finished 2 of the titles however, so do not cry for me.

Jen: And LUCKILY for me there is only one on this list that I haven't read yet, though now faced with actually having to talk about them, I'm like damn, should have made better notes! My darn memory has not been great lately. I will almost certainly reread whichever book wins the prize. Unless of course it's Piranesi because we have already talked all about that one!

Jen: Okay so they announced this list on April 28th and it was so fun. I'm sure that usually they do something bigger precovid? I'm not sure. But this year anyways there was a countdown and then a video played and it announced the books and there was music and then readings from each of the books. There was also a live chat happening which was fun! I loved it. It was great.

Shanna: Oh that does sound like a good time! Where did you watch that? I guess the Women's Prize For Fiction Website probably hey?

Jen: Yeah I found the link on their Instagram and it took me to YouTube. I found out about it literally minutes before they were going to announce it. I was looking at their Instagram to see if the list had been announced yet and then boom...watching a video. If I had known in advance, I would have told you and made it a thing.

Shanna: Ok, on to the short list!

Shanna: **The Vanishing Half by Britt Bennett**

Jen: I was not surprised that this one made the list. I wasn't sure if its immense popularity would work for it or against it or.... neither. I read this one earlier this year and it was really good. It's about identical twin sisters who grow up in a town solely inhabited by black people who strive to have the lightest skin possible. The entire town was built around this ideal. So one of the sisters finds out accidentally that she is so fair

that she can pass as white. Then she starts presenting herself as white on purpose and when she's given the opportunity to shed her identity as a black person and live as white permanently she does because unfortunately, being white is easier. This means that she has to abandon her family and live a lie. She marries a white man, lives in a white community and all the while is terrified of anyone finding out her secret. The other sister does the opposite, she marries a very dark skinned man and has a daughter with him. Eventually she has to move home, but it's not so easy because her daughter is so dark skinned and now she must grow up in a town that doesn't fully accept her.

Jen: In this book we have multiple generations and storylines. There were definitely perspectives that I enjoyed more than others but overall it was a very well written book about something that I find to be so interesting. It wasn't my favorite book of all time but I would give it 4 stars! I feel like I went into it with such high expectations and that can be hard to live up to sometimes.

Shanna: This is a super popular title I have been avoiding for no good reason. It would appear that the universe desperately wants me to read this book however, so don't worry, I am on it.

Jen: The Universe is doing the thing!

Jen: **Piranesi by Susanna Clarke**

Shanna: Loved it, loved it, loved it! We did an entire podcast episode on this one, so check it out if you haven't yet. I also put up a spoiler free review on my youtube channel if you just can't get enough of me talking about this one.

Jen: Yes, I guess if this one wins the prize, we've already talked about it so much...we might have to get creative for the winners episode!

Shanna: This was Susanna Clarke's second book, and she once again knocked it out of the park, according to the majority anyways. This one is weird. It is a pretty short book that has so many different interpretations it's super hard to pin down. It is also a very short read, especially if you are comparing it to her other smash hit Johnathan Strange and Mr Norell which clocked in at a whopping 782 pages in the hardcover edition.

Shanna: Piranesi is a strange little tale about a man who lives alone in a massive house. The rooms are infinite, and it goes on forever and ever. The whole place is filled with statues and oceans, corridors and staircases. It's pretty sweet. As I said Piranesi lives here alone, and believes himself to be one of the only people in the entire world.

He has a sometimes companion in “The Other”, named that way because ... he's ... the other person in the world. Otherwise all other known entities are skeletons that he has found throughout the house and he takes care of, bringing offerings to them and creating backstories for each. See, it's strange, but I am telling you it is also very compelling when you are in it.

Jen: If you've listened to our Piranesi episode, you will know that I didn't love it. Or, I guess I just didn't get it. But that being said, I did enjoy reading it. It's a short ride, which I was glad for, but I didn't want to put it down.

Shanna: I have said it time and time again, knowing as little as possible going into this one is the way to go, because it is such an individual read that can be interpreted so many different ways, that I think it is better to go in with a blank slate. The story is put together in such a way that it can be something completely different depending on the reader, which is bookish magic in my opinion.

Jen: Yes, I agree that going in with no information is the better way to go even though that didn't exactly work out in my favor, but that's okay.

Shanna: This also isn't the only award that Piranesi has been up for since its 2020 release. It has also been included ...

Hugo Award Nominee for Best Novel (2021), Nebula Award Nominee for Best Novel (2020), Costa Book Award Nominee for Novel (2020), Women's Prize for Fiction Nominee for Shortlist (2021), Goodreads Choice Award Nominee for Fantasy (2020)

Shanna: I think this is undeniably a great novel, as it is being widely recognized by so many different kinds of readers. I think I'm gonna say it now, I think this one may have it. It definitely isn't for everyone, as Jen can attest to, but, it's really made its mark across the reading world.

Jen: Wow! Is this your final answer? Could it be your final prediction? Honestly... I wouldn't be surprised if it wins. In fact, I'm fully expecting it to. It's not the book that I want to win. But I do think it will.

Shanna: I think so!

Shanna: **Unsettled Ground by Claire Fuller**

Shanna: Okay so this is one that hasn't yet been released in Canada but it will be released on May 18, so not too far off. Luckily, we both got an advanced review copy so we can start reading now!

Jen: What we do know about it is that it's about twins, Jeanie and Julius, who are 51 years old and live with their mother in rural isolation and poverty. The life they are used to is threatened when their mother suddenly dies and some secrets come out. That's pretty much all I know other than it's obviously really good and I'm really excited to read it.

Shanna: I actually have been really excited to start this one as well. It sounds like it is totally going to be my kind of thing. I love me some spooky atmosphere.

Jen: Yes it does feel like there will be some mysterious atmosphere going on. I have really nothing to go on because I have only read maybe the first page of this book but I think I have been hesitating picking it up because I am getting some Ghost Wall vibes. Ghost Wall is a book by Sarah Moss that I DNF'd because I was bored to actual death by it. I don't know why Unsettled Ground is giving me the same feels. I have no basis for it at all because I didn't actually read Ghost Wall either. Everytime I go to pick up this book though, despite me being interested in what the synopsis says, I'm like...no.

Jen: Sorry to you all that we don't have much more to say about this one! We tried

Jen: **Transcendent Kingdom by Yaa Gyasi**

Jen: I really loved this book and I think that you would really like it too! I originally did the audio which I really enjoyed but I think I'm gonna do a reread of the physical book as well. It's about a woman named Gifty who is doing research on what makes some people prone to addictions and others not. Her brother died of an overdose when she was young and her mother suffers from severe depression so she wants to understand more about the pleasure centers of the brain and try to find ways to help people who are struggling in these areas. All of this is wrapped up in a story that questions the relevance of both science and religion which are both really important to Gifty but obviously they don't really go together.

Shanna: I have started this one and have been enjoying it! When I can get to it anyways. A lot of solo parenting lately means children constantly all up in my butt, so my audio book time has unfortunately been suffering.

Jen: At first I thought that I wasn't going to like this book because I generally don't go for books that are overly sciencey because that's just not how my brain works and I'm also not religious. So at first glance, it didn't seem to be the book for me but she does such a great job of explaining the science in a way that makes sense and the religion side of the story is very accessible. I really enjoyed it.

Shanna: **How The One Armed Sister Sweeps Her House by Cherie Jones**

Jen: Ugh. This book. It was so good, but also so very sad. If you are sensitive to any kind of subject matter, trigger warnings for anything and everything in this book. I can usually handle quite a lot and I almost put it down. In fact, I did put it down. I took a break and at the time I wasn't sure if I was going to be able to pick it up again. In the end, I did, but I really think that if this wasn't part of a publicly announced reading goal, I probably wouldn't have finished. Despite it being beautifully written, this podcast is the only reason I finished it. It is about a woman named Lala who marries the wrong guy and finds herself mixed up in a life that is impossible to escape. It's set in Barbados and intertwines Lala's story with that of a vacationing family who suffers a tragic home invasion. The way that I have been describing this book is "unrelenting sorrow". It doesn't let up and whatever joy there is, is so fleeting that it's almost not even there. I listened to this book on audio and the narrator, Danielle Vitalis, was fantastic but her voice is also very haunting and I think that it may have contributed to the overall sorrow of the book. I really thought that it was so good, but I cannot, in good conscience, recommend it to anyone. The saddest part of the book was an infant death and that's not a spoiler, it's in the synopsis but I think that because I have a baby, it just hits so much harder. Perhaps people who don't have kids would feel differently about this book because they would be able to remove themselves a little bit, but even if this part doesn't ruin you, don't worry there are plenty of other horrible things to get you.

Shanna: Yeah, I haven't picked it up since you told me not to. I figure if you could barely handle it right now, I don't have a chance. I honestly probably won't UNLESS it wins. I've gone back and forth on whether or not I should just plug the audio book in to my ears and get it over with so I can have an opinion. I probably shouldn't. It sounds like it would be too much.

Jen: I DO NOT WANT YOU TO READ IT! It was so hard for me to get through and given how sensitive you are to this kind of story in general, and because you have a baby in your belly right now and are about to have a real life tiny baby at home. As your friend, I do not recommend it now or maybe even, ever. I would actually be concerned

about how you were doing if I knew you were reading it. I don't know, maybe I'm being dramatic. Honest to god, if this book wins, I will do the episode alone.

Shanna: Oh thank goodness.

Shanna: **No One is Talking About This by Patricia Lockwood**

Jen: I was so hoping that this one wouldn't make it because I just do not want to talk about it. I'm sorry Patricia Lockwood. I believe that you offer something really great to the people who understand what the hell you're saying. That's just not me. I slogged through this book. If it wasn't for this podcast, this is another one I would have DNF'd almost right from the get go.

Shanna: I KNEW this one was going to make it, and I agree, UGH. I can't deny her writing is very good, but it definitely has a style that is not for me. That combined with the content of this one made it an overall bad time. I've talked about this one a few times in a few places, and I do feel bad and like I am ragging on this book even though I really do think it deserves its place on this list. It was just very bad FOR ME. Basically this one is about an author who got herself Internet famous, and the first half of the book is about how weird the world is now that everything is filtered through the internet. This first half was written in a way I found ... off putting? Not for me anyways. The jokes were not in line with my own humour for the most part, and it was like 70% jokes ... I think?

Jen: I did not understand that it was supposed to be funny AT ALL until I read somewhere that it was twitter humor? I just didn't get the joke. I was so confused.

Shanna: The second half focuses on real life outside of the internet sphere, and on her family's life as the writer's sister goes through a difficult and ill fated pregnancy, where the baby is not expected to survive birth, and if they do, not to live long.

Jen: It was very very sad, but the second half of the book I enjoyed much more than the first.

Shanna: Me too writing wise! And if I was a totally different human I may even have been able to see the art in it. But, I mean, you can see why this was not a fun read. It isn't "fun" for anyone, but I very much do not recommend it if you have a baby in your belly and are currently living through a weird and scary time, like oh I don't know, a pandemic?

Jen: I'm actually a little bit nervous that this book is going to win because I honestly don't know how we would do an entire episode about it. I didn't understand. See you next week!

Shanna: Right? I don't really know either. I just don't want to spend any more time with it personally. I guess if you are looking for very poetic writing and lots of tears ... this is the one for you!

Jen: So that is all the books that made the shortlist! What about you guys? What do you think? Do you agree with this list? Have you read any of these books? And which book do you predict will win the prize!? We want to know it all, so get in touch with us and tell what you think!

Shanna: The winner of the prize is going to be announced on July 7th so keep an eye out for that and we will be here bringing you all the info on the winner.

Jen: Next month's book club pick is A Thousand Ships by Natalie Haynes which was shortlisted for the women's prize last year! So pick up a copy and read along with us! We are so excited to read it and we would love to hear what you think of this book.

Shanna: You can find us at [best_bookclub](#) everywhere or you can email us at best_bookclub@outlook.com

Jen: And if you like what you hear, consider rating and reviewing us on apple podcasts! We would love that so much and it helps other book clubbers find us!

Jen: Next week, if all goes as planned, we are going to be starting a two part series where we talk all about A Court of Mist and Fury by Sarah J Maas. It is the second book in the A Court of Thorns and Roses Series. We loved this book and apparently so does the rest of the world so you don't wanna miss it.

Shanna: So I guess we will see you next week!

Jen: See you next week.

Byyyyye