

Holly: [00:00:00] Hi, you are listening to the Indie Bookshelf Podcast with me, Holly,

Aimee: and me Aimee,

Holly: as we champion the indie book industry from independent authors and publishers to independent bookshops, we have a range of literary discussions and book recommendations to indulge your love for all things bookish. In today's episode, we discuss the question, what makes books magical, so make yourselves comfortable, grab a hot drink, and let's dive right.

Aimee: So Holly, what do we mean by making books magical?

Holly: Well, the idea behind this question came from the fact that when I think of the experience of reading, there just seems something intrinsically magical about that process and. I couldn't quite put my finger on what it was that [00:01:00] makes books so special in this regard.

And yet when I wrote the question, it seemed to me that anybody who loves books and loves reading instinctively knows what the question means by what, what makes books magical. But actually when you drill down into it of why do we have this, this magical experience when we are reading. I just wanted, I was interested myself to find out what I thought actually made those ingredients of what it is that makes a book magical, what it is that makes reading so special.

So that was where the idea came from. Um, I dunno whether you have anything to add to that.

Aimee: Do you know? I really don't. You summed it up so beautifully. I think yeah, just the, the fact. Of all the objects in my house, now I'm looking into my house. Now it's, it's the books that as, as an object itself. [00:02:00] It's weirdly special and I know it's just a book and you can see this feels wrong, even saying you can put it in the bin and that's okay.

It's, it's a, it's an object, but saying that felt illegal and there's, yep, there's something. The, the book is an object as well as an experience that is, that is magical. Mm. I'm not gonna put any of my books in the bin, by the way.

Holly: somehow I, uh, I didn't think you would. Um, but yeah, they're, they're somehow precious, aren't they? Um, and. and even like, you know, going back in, in time, I went to a, one of the oldest libraries, um, in the UK a while back, and what they used to do was chain these books to the shelves because they

were so expensive and so precious that [00:03:00] they would have to physically ensure that thieves couldn't come in and take them away.

And okay. We don't chain our books to shelves now, but there is still a sense of, despite the fact that books aren't maybe the most financially, uh, expensive item out there, there's still something so precious about them. And we all have that tatty old book that we read, have read 1,000,001 different times, and maybe we've kept through childhood and that we maybe want to pass on to somebody that they're, they're sentimental objects as well.

Um, which is really special. And, and I think one of the things, just as I was sort of preparing for this discussion, um, one of the things I was thinking about is, um, I don't consider films to be magical in anything like the same way, despite the fact that films are incredible. Artistry, and there's the script writing, [00:04:00] there's acting in there, there's music.

You know, if, if you, if you're coming from an all-encompassing creative experience, a film really is that, and yet, and yet it doesn't feel magical in the same way as reading a book is, and I want to know why.

Aimee: Ah, no. Cause I'm gonna start going on about the library now, which is just a magical access to books. We're not gonna do that. Now is not the time, but get a library card if you don't have one already.

Holly: Wonderful. One other thing. As I was sort of just preparing for this was when I think about the magic of books, there is one quote that just stands out to me.

Um, from Roll Dahl's book, Matilda. Now I know Roll Dahl is an interesting figure at the moment and that that is a discussion for another day. Um, I have no idea whether this particular bit has been edited or not. Um, but I'm [00:05:00] going to read the quote that I found, um, just because I think it captures something of the magic of reading. So this is the quote from Matilda. "The books transported her into new worlds and introduced her to amazing people who lived exciting lives. She went in olden day sailing ships with Joseph Conrad. She went to Africa with Ernest Hemingway and to India with Rudyard Kipling. She traveled all over the world while sitting in her little room in an English village. So Matilda's Strong Young Mind continued to grow, nurtured by the voices of all those authors who had sent their books out into the world, like Ships on the Sea. These books gave Matilda a hopeful and comforting message. You are not alone."

I just think that's beautiful.

Aimee: It is, it is. Let's dive in. What books do you find the most magical?[00:06:00]

Holly: I think the books I find the most magical are those that somehow connect and resonate really deeply with me. Whether it's the characters that just almost feel like friends because somehow somebody has written them in such a way that they feel so true to life or whether it's.

A way of looking at the world and a perspective that I would not have thought of myself and yet that really connects and means something to me and changes the way maybe I interact with the world or think about it, or just a really immersive experience where you feel as if you are living in the time place world that the author is describing and.

Where somehow it, it connects with you to the point where you feel like you are living through the narrative somehow. That that is what comes to mind straight away. What do you [00:07:00] think, Aimee?

Aimee: I'm trying to think of a particular book, but what I find particularly magical about books is you can find one that, that if you read it at the right moment in your life, speak so, so clearly to, to what you're going through or like how your brain is where you are at that time, and you can live through this experience of a book.

And if you come back to it a year or two years later and read it, it's, it's a completely different experience.

Holly: Mm-hmm.

Aimee: Um, and you can read a book on the contrary one year, and you think this is, I don't see what the hype is for this. And then perhaps your circumstances change and you might be able to reread that book and it, it speaks to you the same way that it spoke to other people.

Um, so yes, I think what, what I find really magical about [00:08:00] books is how it can just really reflect your own life and how that experience of the book changes depending on who you are and where.

Holly: Yeah, that makes complete sense. There's something about no matter how many times you might read a book, each reading of it is individual and

unique. And there are particular occasions when we might read a book that where it just resonates so deeply. And shines a light, maybe, maybe mirrors to us what we are thinking and feeling and, and enables us to find a form of self-expression perhaps through a different character, a different person.

Um, but enables us to feel like what we're going through on the inside is somehow expressed in what we're reading. [00:09:00] Mm.

Aimee: Can't think of any examples.

Holly: I can think of one example, um, from when I first got back into reading for Pleasure, which was I'd, I'd spent many, many years reading mainly for study through school and university, and really hadn't read many books for fun at all during that period because it just felt like work to me.

And then it was during, um, it was two years after I left uni and I started reading again, just taking books outta my local library and that I read one of Harold Matthews books in her chocolate club series. I believe it's either the second or the third in the series. And the main character was really struggling [00:10:00] with just the pace of life and how busy everything was, and the fact that she was so tired and she didn't have time, really just spend with her boyfriend particularly.

And he was also working really hard and they felt like ships in the night. And this was the kind of setup. For the book and something in that just made me go, hang on, but I'm tired, I'm struggling, I'm feeling like I'm passing with my husband, like ships in the night. Um, we are both so busy, we're so overwhelmed.

We are not, we don't have the energy to even have that quality time together. And I kind of was already aware that that was where I was. And yet the fact that it was written so beautifully and sensitively and compassionately in this book, I think enabled me to have a new way of seeing my own experience and saying, okay, maybe, maybe I need to change something here.

What is it that I'm actually going through? Maybe I can have more compassion to myself rather than just feeling annoyed with [00:11:00] myself that I don't seem to be able to have the energy to cope with things. And that was a, a really strong moment of that. Wow. That book really mirrored my own experience back to me.

Um, which, Yeah, quite moving, really.

Aimee: Mm-hmm . , I've got my example. Um, not from, not from a, a book that speaks to your own experience, but a book that's magical through showing just what language can do, uh, mm-hmm. , uh, it's Ella Minnow Pea by Mark Dunn, and it's set in this, uh, fictional world where the alphabet is revered.

And they've got a, um, it's the alphabet spelt out on, I can't remember, can think of the word. It's like a mural, um, sculpture type thing. And it's, it's written entirely in, it is an epistolary[00:12:00] novel. So it's, it's letters between, between the characters. And one day, uh, one of the ladders falls off from this mural sculpture.

And the elders or the leaders of this town get together and they decree that this is a sign and it means that we are no longer allowed to use that letter of the alphabet. So the subsequent letters, all of the words don't use that letter. And it, it's really easy at first cause you can just, I can't remember what the letter was, but it was, it wasn't a frequently used one, so they adapted their language a bit so that they didn't need to use words that had that letter in. And then another letter fell off and they adapted their language further. And then, uh, several more letters fell off and they had to start changing words to fit these, this new constraint. Um, and it was just such a creative way of using language and showing the [00:13:00] impact that each individual letter of the alphabet has on how we, on how we use words and I read it all basically in one sitting. Um, and had the worst book hangover of my life, because I missed it so much. I'd spent, you know, eight, 10 hours in this world where something was being done that I hadn't seen before. And something so creative and something you couldn't really replicate cause you'd just be doing the same thing.

So it wasn't even like I could go and read another book at the same genre because it, it's special. Um, and I just had to sit with the fact that that's the only time that I can read that book for the first time. Um, which was, was like, it's a very happy and exciting experience and also quite depressing.

Holly: Hmm. And it's funny, I think it's, it's quite rare in our day and age. [00:14:00] You get those one time moments. For example, with music we, in, in the past, people would go to a concert and that would be the only time they'd hear a piece of music because people didn't have iPods, iPhones, that Spotify and so on. Um, whereas nowadays, you know, we'll listen to the same, listen to the same songs probably most days.

Um, And it's, it's very much a repeated experience, whereas I think, as you say, with a book, um, particularly for that, that example, but it's still much more of a one time experience still, which, yeah, there's something quite rare about that.

Aimee: Are there any books that you don't consider magical?

Holly: That's a really interesting question. Um,

Aimee: You wrote it!.

Holly: Well, yes, but I didn't, I didn't think about it when I wrote [00:15:00] it down where I think I was coming from with this question was, every now and again I come across a book that just doesn't work for me, and I'm the kind of person who will not soldier through to the end of the book. If it's really not doing anything for me, I will finish it probably about a third of the way.

If it's still not doing anything for me at that point, I'd give up on it. And this in fact, was something that happened to me this week. I've been reading a book. It's a cozy murder mystery. It's set in Cambridge, it's historical fiction. It had all the elements of a great book, and yet it felt like eating cardboard.

It really, it was so dry and tasteless and. Quite unpleasant Somehow. It, it was hard work reading it, but not because the language was difficult, just because it was [00:16:00] so bland. I don't know how to describe, I'm not gonna tell you what book, it's because I don't to offend any author, um, . Um, but it, it was a really interesting experience because that book for me really was a magical.

And the, or maybe the experience of reading it wasn't, and maybe it was for other people and, um, you know, maybe the process of writing it was magical for the author and there are all sorts of other ways it could be considered. But for me personally, reading it, it didn't do anything and I, I ended up putting it down and leaving it, and so I.

It's possible for, even though I would say there's something magical about books as a whole and reading as a whole, sometimes I do think there's an element of quality or timing that is necessary in order to make the reading experience of it magical and that those criteria of the time being right and the quality of the book aren't always met in every single [00:17:00] reading experience.

Aimee: Mm-hmm. Yes.

Holly: You're looking thoughtful. What, what are your thoughts?

Aimee: I'm looking thoughtful. So I think the books that I would objectively say aren't magical are the books that I don't want to give airtime to, so I'm not gonna

talk about them. Um, and yeah, I think it comes down to, to what makes a book magical is the relationship you have with it.

Sounds so gross. Um, sorry, I just sickened myself a little bit there. So, so like I was saying earlier, you don't always have that connection with a book, and it's a bit like food. Sometimes you are just really craving a, well, I'm craving at the minutes, some cozy mysteries. And normally they, they don't, they don't gel with me normally.

That's not what I just want to grab. Um, but at the minute that there's just sooth. It's a [00:18:00] soothing experience, so it's nothing innate and like to do specifically with the books that I'm reading. It's about how I'm interacting with them at, at that moment. And that means that each book is magical or not magical for, for different people at different times.

Mm-hmm. , I love answering a question by not answering it.

Holly: No, it's, it's a really interesting point and I think what you've just done is I think, separated two facets of what makes a book magical, one of which is the reading experience and the reader's relationship to the book itself. But I think you also Drew something else out in your first comment there about there being some books you just don't wanna give airtime to.

And, um, okay. We, we could be debating what, what books fall on that list, but let's say for example, as a. Point to illustrate a point, let's use Hitler's Mein Kampf. [00:19:00] Okay? That's a very famous book, and I would never in a million years, in any situation call it magical, for obvious reasons, which I do not think we need to explain here.

Aimee: No, no, we do not.

Holly: Um, but it's interesting that, that, that is a book . Um, some people read it and found. It connected with them. I am horrified that it did, um, but I would still never, ever call that book magical. And I think that therefore indicates there's something objective about the ideas and the quality of a book.

And to my mind, a book is meant to broaden your empathy. It's meant to broaden your cultural horizons. It's meant to help you identify with other people in their point of view. It's meant to be an agent of positive change. Inclusivity and diversity in the world. And if a book is not even just not [00:20:00] doing that, but actively harming those ideals and principles, then that, to me

immediately negates uh, the possibility of it ever being magical regardless of what a reader's experience of it is.

Aimee: Yes. I think that was the perfect example to use to illustrate that point. There are books that cause harm and they're not magical.

Holly: Yeah. And in fact, I, I do think that, um, it was interesting. I, I was chatting to, um, some friends and asking their thoughts on this, uh, fellow book lovers. And one of the things that, um, came up a couple of times was the fact that for them, what makes a book magical, one of the ideas about it was that it broadens your perspective.

It gives you a, an increased sense of. Creates your perspective outside of your own point of view. And, and I think if a book is partially magical because it, it [00:21:00] taps into those deeper act where maybe we want to call 'em psychological or um, sociological or even spiritual aspects of connecting with one another in loving healthy ways.

And therefore, if a book is not doing that, that immediately. Makes it not magical. Whereas a book, if a book is, that immediately increases its magic rating. I dunno. I'm, I'm waving my hands about here. Aimee's laughing at me.

Aimee: You should, um, make a graph. Shall we graph, dive into some of the responses from other readers on this you've already touched on.

Holly: Yes. Let's do that. Do you wanna fire away?

Aimee: See, the first one that you've got down here is escapism and I both wholly. And wholly disagree all in one cause I think some books for me are a really, really escapist experience and others are [00:22:00] magical in the way that they ground me in reality. Um, so a book I'm reading at the minute is, I've forgotten what the book I'm called Reading is called

Holly: No, it's the classic reader's dilemma, isn't it? Yeah. You get put on the spot and it's like, what am I reading?

Aimee: The book that I'm reading the Minute is called, uh, entangled Life by Merlin Sheldrake you might have seen about, because, uh, Waterstones are really pushing it. Uh, and that's non-fiction and it's all about mushrooms and our relationship with mushrooms and mushrooms, relationship with plants and the world and life.

And it is incredibly grounding because it's real and it's, you know, it's existence. Um, And honestly, I might need an escaped brome once I've finished reading it. Um, so yeah, it's a, you can find magic in the escapism and in the sign the grounding sensations of reading.

Holly: Hmm. No, [00:23:00] that, that makes sense. And I think bringing in non-fiction is a really important point here at the Pops.

When we first think of the question, what makes books magical, we immediately think of fiction. And we immediately think of those books where we do feel like we get caught up in that different world or different time or different place, um, that have that escapist facet to them. And yet that isn't a while.

It might help make this particular book magical or this particular reading experience magical. It's not. A necessary requirement in order to make a book magical. And actually, as you've just said, there are all sorts of non-fiction books which aren't escapist at all, um, or which maybe have a different way of being escapist and that they're drawing your attention to certain parts of reality that help you focus hi, almost hyper focus in on that particular element and [00:24:00] that that is a very different form of magical to the fiction experience.

Aimee: Mm-hmm. Or even fiction, especially partially, um, semi autobiographical novels that can have that, that can be heavy and bleak or, or books. Um, Tony Morrison comes to mind and they're not escapist they at all. Every book that she wrote had a purpose. And that purpose was to communicate something, um, and to communicate reality. And for, for Tony Morrison's books in particular, is that that communication of reality that's, that's magical about her books and about how she gives life and experience to her characters in a way that you, you just can't escape reality because she's put it right there in front.

Holly: Mm. And I think [00:25:00] interestingly is another example of a book which isn't escapist at all. Um, if we look at maybe more the how to or self-help genre, again, very grounded in practical, down to earth real situations. And I read a book, which I would say changed my. Um, and I don't use that phrase lightly. It was a book called, oh no, I'm gonna forget the name as well.

It was either Write Now or Write It All Down. I think it was called Write It All Down by Cathy Rentzenbrink. And it was the book that started me writing and that was the impact it had. It gave me the courage and the inspiration and the practical guidance to begin my own writing practice. And outta that has been born.

Five children's books and one novel so far, and that novel, that was the impact of that book. Um, [00:26:00] and so for me that was an intensely magical experience. And yet the process of reading it well, in a way, the experience is still continuing because of the impact it's continuing to have on my life. But it wasn't at all escapist. In fact, it was very much. A book that was grounding me and, and pushing me to action in the here and now.

Aimee: Yes. So what we've done is very successfully not defined what makes a book magical

Holly: It's very true. I think as a bit of a summary, we've identified that there are many different criteria that can make a book magical. Um, be that sometimes it's the well building experience. Sometimes it's your connection to a book and the reading experience. Sometimes it's the ideas and concepts that are being communicated in the book.

Um, [00:27:00] sometimes it's about connecting you with empathy and different perspectives. Sometimes it's about being immersed in that world, and sometimes it's about being immersed in our own world through a new lens. Mm. I think what, what this conversation has sort of reflected to me is that it's always very much about the reader and about our needs, our wants, our situation in life, and that somehow through the magic of some squiggles on the page, um, somebody else can have written something which just speaks to us on that deeper level.

Um, or that inspires us or shows us something new about the world and that that is what makes a book magical. And I think we've also discussed which books aren't magical, which is also an important thing we have, which is quite a lot for, you know, half an hour or 20 minutes or however [00:28:00] long we've been here at.

So while we have you here, an update on the editing for Dragon

Aimee: Outlaw, I'm nearly done with the first stage. I am so excited you are getting a, just saying a whole report on your book at the end of next week. Oh, and I'm gonna be here, uh, at the end of an, well, probably a Facebook message because we're friends.

Um, I only communicate with, um, with authors over emails though it's, it's odd to chat with you on Facebook for any questions. Um, but

Holly: we can email if we want to set up professional boundaries for this part.

Aimee: That is, we'll discuss the logistics some other time.

Holly: Not everybody else needs to know. Nobody else needs to hear to this.

Aimee: Uh, but what has been really fun has been, uh, thinking through the plot and thinking through how our readers are going to [00:29:00] experience plot, um, and what our main character is, is thinking and feeling and what's motivating her. I've had a really large, like, a great amount of fun playing around with that and trying to put my, myself in your head and myself in, in your, in your character's heads as I do that.

So that is my, my little editing of update. I've been waiting around in this book and it's nearly done.

Holly: Woo. No, don't worry. You'll get it back. , hopefully in a better shape. .

Aimee: That's the aim.

Holly: That is the aim. That is super exciting. So nearly at the end of the developmental editing. And into the writing phase.

Um, and the other news is we will be going to the book fair in April, the London book Fair. So that is super exciting. We need to get sorting with logistics on that. Yes, we do find us for a free asteria press will [00:30:00] be there. Yes. Find us for a free bookmark. Exactly. I also need to sort that out. Yeah. But, um,

Aimee: thank you creative director Holly

Holly: Fun times. . So we'll be back in a fortnight with another book recommendation for you,

Aimee: and that book is Scales of Ash and Smoke by Emily Schneider. Until then, keep reading.