



Waves of YA, Episode 18, Cults of YA

Transcript:

00;00;07;06 - 00;00;20;18

Cecilia

[CECILIA] Hello and welcome to Waves of YA, a podcast focused on young adult literacy brought to you by the Ocean County Library Teen Literacy Workgroup. My name is Cecilia. I'm one of the team librarians here at Ocean County. Joining me today, we have...

00;00;20;27 - 00;00;24;19

Kristen

[KRISTEN] Kristen and I'm also a teen librarian at the Ocean County Library.

00;00;25;00 - 00;00;30;25

Chris

[CHRIS] And Chris and I am a teen librarian department head, also, in Ocean County.

00;00;31;07 - 00;00;52;08

Cecilia

[CECILIA] Today's episode will be focused on Cults in YA. We'll be discussing books featuring the popular trend of cults, which often pop up in YA thrillers preying on the sheltered and isolated nature that leaves readers in suspense. The first question we have is what is appealing about cults, especially in young adult literature?

00;00;52;21 - 00;01;16;26

Chris

[CHRIS] I, um, especially with the my favorite one that I read, Hell Followed With Us, I like that it's explores like that sense of isolation, specifically that one about being queer and being trans, but also being a teenager so hard and like, I remember just feeling like all alone. Like no one gets me even when you're like, Yeah, my friends get me.

00;01;16;26 - 00;01;26;15

Chris

[CHRIS] But like, do they get me? Like when you're surrounded by people, friends, family, like, feeling alone and then also being able to explore that feeling of being alone and finding your place.

00;01;27;09 - 00;01;29;05

Cecilia

[CECILIA] Which is especially hard to do in a cult.

00;01;29;22 - 00;01;31;15

Chris

[CHRIS] Yeah. You're like, Oh, I don't fit in.

00;01;32;08 - 00;01;33;01

Cecilia

[CECILIA] Everyone is the same.

00;01;33;26 - 00;01;38;04

Chris

[CHRIS] And like, for a cult, like, if you leave, you're getting shunned.

00;01;38;04 - 00;01;38;18

Cecilia

[CECILIA] Yeah.

00;01;38;18 - 00;02;00;11

Chris

[CHRIS] Do you take that risk of leaving everything you know, to be true to yourself and find where you belong or you just settle and this is what you got. This is what you know, stay safe or safe ish. Where you're at, it's comfortable because you always know what to expect.

00;02;00;20 - 00;02;24;23

Kristen

[KRISTEN] Yeah, well, I think that the same things that I find appealing about reading books, about actual cults is also appealing in YA. Because, yes, being in a cult and not feeling that you belong is incredibly isolating. But that's not why people get into cults. So a lot of the books that I read, the parents get their children into the cults, and then the children are like dealing with the fallout.

00;02;25;00 - 00;02;47;15

Kristen

[KRISTEN] But the thing about cults is no one enters one in order to feel isolated. Often they don't know that they're entering a cult until they're so far, deep into it. Or they never realize until usually something tragic happens. But I'm a nerd for cults. There's a lot of people that really like true crime and serial killers right now.

00;02;47;15 - 00;03;14;08

Kristen

[KRISTEN] But cults are so fascinating to me because the people that enter them in the beginning in general, it's usually about finding a place of belonging, and it's about a group of like minded people that want to change the world or want to avoid something in the world that they feel is a negative change. And so, in YA, seeing these cults creep in there.

00;03;15;04 - 00;03;38;25

Kristen

[KRISTEN] It's almost like you get to see what the second generation in the cult is seeing, because most of these books that I've been reading, the children are not choosing to join a cult. The children have grown into a cult and now they're teenagers are like, wait a minute, there is a different world. But cults are so insular that they usually only see a glimpse of the world until they get out into it.

00;03;38;25 - 00;03;51;13

Kristen

[KRISTEN] And then they get out and into the world and see, like, wait, there's, like, a lot of other stuff that I didn't even know was different. And I think that that's, like, you get to see the world the first time from some of the teens in these books.

00;03;52;04 - 00;04;21;17

Cecilia

[CECILIA] Yeah, that's a really good point. I think one of the other things is like teens are so vulnerable to like those outside influences, they're kind of cults. Kind of cling to them like the leaders and stuff. I know in The Project, she's trying to find her sister that has got into a cult and that she gets involved as well because of like the vulnerability that she's feeling in that moment.

00;04;21;29 - 00;04;32;08

Cecilia

[CECILIA] So it's interesting to see the two different perspectives of growing up in the cult and then what is this cult offering me that I'm not getting in the quote unquote real world.

00;04;33;14 - 00;04;34;29

Kristen

[KRISTEN] But they all come with a price.

00;04;35;02 - 00;04;35;23

Cecilia

[CECILIA] Oh, yeah.

00;04;36;05 - 00;04;57;17

Kristen

[KRISTEN] Like real, real cults and cults in YA, they all come with a trade off. And leaving the cult has a very high impact on individuals lives. Like in general, if you leave a cult, you leave all the people that are

still in that cult, you're now not really welcome. So that means your family. That means your friends. That could mean significant others.

00;04;57;26 - 00;05;16;10

Kristen

[KRISTEN] And so there's a very high price to pay for what the promised, whether that's salvation or freedom or staying away from disease or whatever it is, you're paying if you leave, and you're paying if you stay in as well.

00;05;17;03 - 00;05;19;09

Cecilia

[CECILIA] It's like a balancing act of like, what do you want more?

00;05;19;18 - 00;05;39;11

Kristen

[KRISTEN] Right! It's like in fantasy. Or when you meet the crossroads demon, right? The demons going to give you something good. But it's going to cost you and you need to like weigh those to decide, should I get into this arrangement? Because X, Y and Z will be better, but there is going to be a cost.

00;05;40;27 - 00;05;43;28

Chris

[CHRIS] Because for teens, like, if they've grown up in that cult, they don't have...

00;05;44;11 - 00;05;45;28

Cecilia

[CECILIA] That's all they know.

00;05;46;00 - 00;06;14;20

Chris

[CHRIS] That's all they know. They don't have support like an adult leaving has the people they knew before and during. Teens are, like, I'm going off into the total unknown, no supports. So it's going to be riskier, like they don't have probably any other documentation that even if they know where to look for it, can they get at it? Do they know to look for all this documentation? Like going out, you're immediately limited. Also, like you're a minor. What you can do is, your parents can go tell the police you're missing and get brought right back.

00;06;14;28 - 00;06;36;03

Kristen

[KRISTEN] Yes, you're a minor and then you escape. And one of the things, if it's a good cult, a cult that is successful, the more rules that the cult has, the more likely the cult is to keep its followers. So when you leave, you also have all the baggage of X amount of rules that your cult required of you.

00;06;36;03 - 00;07;13;15

Kristen

[KRISTEN] So can you comfortably talk to people of the opposite sex or was part of your cult training that you didn't? Or can you accept your sexual orientation when the rules of the cult dictated we are only heterosexuals? That's why I say it's like in the YA cult books, you're seeing our world for the first time from these teens that have exited a cult because all of their training and all of their rules mean that for the first time they see an LGBTQ+ center for the first time, they see sometimes strict rules about dress.

00;07;13;17 - 00;07;31;15

Kristen

[KRISTEN] So they see people in short sleeves and shorts when it's hot, and you get to see this new world from teens that are exiting cults. Are there any moments in the books that you have read about cults in YA that left you at the edge of your seat without giving any spoilers, please?

00;07;32;08 - 00;07;58;06

Cecilia

[CECILIA] Well, the premise of the, I'm gonna keep going back to The Project, 'cause that was all about cults. So she is trying to figure out what happened to her sister, Lo is trying to figure out exactly what happened to her sister, after she went, disappeared into this cult. So it's kind of got that investigative journalism feel. So she kind of it's like infiltrating.

00;07;58;06 - 00;08;21;20

Cecilia

[CECILIA] So like the whole book is like edge of your seat. Is she going to get found out? What exactly happened to her sister, Bea? And then like as you're finding all these things out, like, you know, it's amping up like one person is one piece of information and you're like struggling being like, oh my God, are they going to find out that she knows A, B and C yet? Or...

00;08;22;16 - 00;08;22;23

Kristen

[KRISTEN] Yeah.

00;08;22;24 - 00;08;28;03

Cecilia

[CECILIA] So like the whole investigative journalism thing kind of left you on the on the edge.

00;08;28;23 - 00;08;54;09

Kristen

[KRISTEN] I thought The Project was also, in addition to that investigative journalism piece, you're seeing like a person that doesn't buy into the cult, go in and infiltrate it, which is very uncommon point of view. And whether or not that person is going to get caught always adds that drama of like, are they going to find out and how are they going to deal with that?

00;08;55;03 - 00;09;17;13

Cecilia

[CECILIA] I also thought what was really interesting is they went into the back story of the leader of the cult, too, and kind of showed how he got there and, like, where the charisma and charm and his whole back story comes from, which was really interesting. I'm always fascinated about, like, what makes a person start these kinds of things.

00;09;17;13 - 00;09;35;02

Cecilia

[CECILIA] Like, even with true life cult stuff, it almost seems like it stems from somewhere, either a past experience or something in there. There's always some kind of prismatic element that they bring to the table that brings other people to their table.

00;09;35;29 - 00;10;02;16

Kristen

[KRISTEN] And that's true in real life because the things that make a cult leader or close to cult leaders like the upper echelons of cults, the things that make them successful in a cult one is like charisma. Sometimes they have some narcissistic personality, but for the most part, the feeling that people get from cult leaders is, this person is investing time in me and they're having, like, these meaningful, deep conversations.

00;10;02;16 - 00;10;32;11

Kristen

[KRISTEN] It is really fascinating to see how many people had experience in government or got involved in government that were also either in a cult or led a cult. And people that were very trusted by other people in the public before it was found out what they were doing. Charisma and charm are incredibly important. And then there are also pieces of back stories that are like, it's not like, if X happens to you, you will become a cult leader.

00;10;32;20 - 00;11;15;24

Kristen

[KRISTEN] But there are commonalities between cult leaders that it's like it's the optimum situation for developing that personality and then developing like really going all in, and developing a cult. But like with The Project, seeing the foundations, so that was the part of Hell Followed With Us that I liked the story, but I want to know, probably because I am like a cult nerd, I want to know why did these people buy in? Who was the person that brought them in? And, how did they become who they are? And that book was not about that. But in Courtney Summers, The Project, that got to be a little bit of a part of it, to find out about this person.

00;11;16;05 - 00;11;41;19

Cecilia

[CECILIA] Yeah, it really did touch on all the different aspects of what brings people in and like you brought up the honing in on individuality. I think that is kind of what brings like teens in like, oh, I'm important, I like this individual and not seeing them as you're just a teen, you're part of that group of age group.

00;11;42;07 - 00;11;55;00

Kristen

[KRISTEN] And these older adults are investing their time into mentoring me. They're investing their time into having deep discussions with me. They value me. And those are reasons why people might stay.

00;11;55;26 - 00;12;02;18

Cecilia

[CECILIA] Now, I don't think this is technically a cult book, but has anybody read *Grown* by Tiffany Jackson?

00;12;03;06 - 00;12;03;10

Kristen

[KRISTEN] Yes!

00;12;03;10 - 00;12;14;00

Chris

[CHRIS] I stresses me out from the summary, so I haven't read it. I have to be prepared. I was like, no, I watched, like, a whole documentary on R. Kelly, like, I want to, I just...

00;12;14;19 - 00;12;29;07

Cecilia

[CECILIA] Yeah. But I guess us talking about the individuality and this and stuff. I think he does that, the singer in the book, that she kind of gets involved with, and kind of he has other girls.

00;12;29;07 - 00;12;51;21

Kristen

[KRISTEN] It's a smaller scale cult. He's a, he is an abuser and he uses his connections and his promises to keep people trapped. There's one scene in that book, not to ruin the entire book, but there's a scene in that book that I found was really poignant when the police show up and she is making a choice of whether to tell this police officer what's happening to her.

00;12;51;21 - 00;12;52;02

Cecilia

[CECILIA] Yeah.

00;12;52;02 - 00;13;04;00

Kristen

[KRISTEN] Or whether to toe the line and make excuses for her abuser. And I felt like, for me, that part of that book was incredibly tense and it had me, like, oh, what's she going to do?

00;13;04;14 - 00;13;09;22

Cecilia

[CECILIA] Yeah, there's lots of bits and pieces of that book that definitely leave you on the edge of your seat.

00;13;10;02 - 00;13;22;27

Chris

[CHRIS] For me, I read *The Sacred Lies of Minnow Bly* by Stephanie Oaks, and it's not a spoiler because it's like the first five pages you find out her father cut her hands off.

00;13;22;27 - 00;13;23;20

Cecilia

[CECILIA] Oof!

00;13;23;20 - 00;13;41;23

Chris

[CHRIS] Yeah. So, like, it's her dealing with, like, being out in society for the first time. She's on trial for aggravated assault and has no hands, and she's trying to learn how to exist as a person and then also learn how to exist without hands and, you know, the whole book because it's flashbacks.

00;13;42;05 - 00;14;04;13

Chris

[CHRIS] And between her talking on trial and then her talking to her therapist and her cellmate while she's in juvie. So, you know, at some point you've got to find out the details about her hands getting cut off. And I'm like, I don't, everything else is happening where you find out, like, how the cult started. I'm like, it's a ticking clock, the whole book.

00;14;04;13 - 00;14;18;21

Chris

[CHRIS] And I'm like, no. And also, like, the night of like, what really happened that led to the aggravated assault, and like the whole book is just a ticking clock of, like, stress. And I'm like, it's coming, and I don't want to read it, but I also want to know, and like...

00;14;19;15 - 00;14;21;10

Cecilia

[CECILIA] I'm tense just listening to that.

00;14;21;27 - 00;14;33;22

Chris

[CHRIS] So it was, the whole book, you're just like, there is a ticking clock this whole book. So I really enjoyed it, but it was, like, the whole book, I was like, we're just going to power through until the end because I need to know.

00;14;33;26 - 00;14;42;24

Cecilia

[CECILIA] But that's such good storytelling. It's like introducing something in the beginning and just like, Oh, we're just going to let this whole book play out until the end.

00;14;44;01 - 00;14;53;17

Chris

[CHRIS] We're going to tell it out of chronological order, piece that together. So like it'll get mentioned, and to, like, drop a hint, drop a hint, and then the third time, it'll be something different. And I'm like...

00;14;54;09 - 00;14;54;22

Cecilia

[CECILIA] Okay, it's coming, it's coming...

00;14;56;05 - 00;15;02;07

Kristen

[KRISTEN] I don't know, you sold that one for me because I know that now, I want to know what happened, so...

00;15;02;18 - 00;15;23;09

Chris

[CHRIS] It's really good, really stressful. I need to mention for Hell Followed With Us, that it doesn't go into the backstory because it's not the point of the book. I was like, I love this. I'm like, I don't care about the backstory. Like, tell me about, like, Benji turning into like a monster, transitioning both gender-wise and also like, hey, your mom turned you into a monster.

00;15;23;21 - 00;15;53;27

Kristen

[KRISTEN] That one did. I mean, even though it didn't go super into, like, the rules of the cult or why the cult formed and all of the stuff that I really want to know about it did pepper pieces of that before with what Benji's life was like in the past. And so that did end up giving me a picture of what Benji was choosing to leave and why Benji might want to do the actions that happened in the book.

00;15;53;27 - 00;16;02;07

Kristen

[KRISTEN] But I like the calling back. It's like a slow reveal, like you can't rip the whole present open, you just like, take a little peek.

00;16;03;19 - 00;16;32;03

Chris

[CHRIS] That one has a ticking clock too, though, because like, often Benji know that they're going to turn to a Seraph or a scary monster depending on whose perspective you go from. Like you're just kind of like, how long are you going to like pass in this book? Like, everyone's real cool. Like they were staying at an LGBT center, the variety of queer is like, it isn't huge, but you are going to transition into a scary monster.

00;16;32;03 - 00;16;32;14

Cecilia

[CECILIA] Yes.

00;16;32;14 - 00;16;46;28

Chris

[CHRIS] Are you still going to be accepted, and also like, are you going to have control. Like while they sit it out also that like ticking clock. All right, things are starting, we know his voices are starting to show. People are start noticing what are they going to say? How are they going to react?

00;16;47;03 - 00;16;47;17

Kristen

[KRISTEN] Yes.

00;16;48;18 - 00;17;40;25

Kristen

[KRISTEN] Definitely having like an end point that you're like, okay, we've got to resolve this in a certain amount of time because we've established that Benji will be changing within a week. So things need to move at that pace and all of those pieces. That was an edge of your seat moment for me was all of the times that Benji is changing and how long can he keep that under a mask? Right? Because some things started being like, um, stuff is falling off of me. Someone might pick up on this, and I feel like there was probably a smell associated with this as well. Yeah. So, but probably also everything smelled because so many people had died, so maybe the whole world smelled. So it was easier to, like, hide that.

00;17;41;03 - 00;17;46;28

Chris

[CHRIS] Yeah. They didn't have, like, much access to running water or soap, so like, everyone's got like, some funky BO.

00;17;47;12 - 00;17;49;19

Kristen

[KRISTEN] Yeah, I really appreciate...

00;17;49;22 - 00;17;50;10

Chris

[CHRIS] Rotting corpse around anyway.

00;17;50;24 - 00;18;03;08

Kristen

[KRISTEN] I really appreciated that when they were sharing the water, Benji's like, I'll go last. It's, you guys, you can use the water first because that would have been even extra nasty. Yeah.

00;18;04;02 - 00;18;21;09

Cecilia

[CECILIA] Now that you brought up supernatural, like I'm trying to wrap my brain around like how many cult YA books had those kind of supernatural elements, whether it's monsters, witches, demons, and Hell Followed With Us is one.

00;18;21;20 - 00;19;13;07

Kristen

[KRISTEN] All Our Hidden Gifts by Carolyn O'Donoghue. That one is witch based, right? And there is a cult, at least in the first book, that I believe will be explored in this second book. And the main protagonist sees the cult and is like, nah, I'm not good. But even though she suspects there's something weird about I think it's the cult of Brigid, when she's actually in the room with the cult leader, I feel like she kind of gets it, why someone would join this group, because she feels good. She feels accepted, she feels part of a thing. And because she has not joined and she leaves, she's like, wait a minute, not all of that is as it seems. So I'm interested to see what the second book brings as far as the cult goes.

00;19;13;08 - 00;19;28;10

Cecilia

[CECILIA] And I think that's like one of the most tense parts of any of these cult books is when you're in the character's head and you read that they're kind of maybe buying into it and you're like, no, this is a cult! Don't go in.

00;19;28;23 - 00;19;51;03

Kristen

[KRISTEN] And it's easy to identify that as the reader. Yeah. Or it's easy to identify that when I'm watching a documentary about a cult. But people who join cults are actually highly intelligent. Yeah. And cult leaders also tend to have higher IQ. These are highly intelligent people that you would not question their reasoning on a day to day basis.

00;19;51;10 - 00;20;15;04

Kristen

[KRISTEN] And there's something about the structure of this that they buy into it. It's not like you're reading the character and you're like, Oh, silly protagonist, this is clearly a cult. I can say that from the outside, but our protagonists are not lacking in intellect. It is part of what a cult is and does.

00;20;15;04 - 00;20;48;00

Cecilia

[CECILIA] But like, seeing that journey of like the beginning of the book, them feeling one way and then the slow progression of their mind either changing like, well, they were in the cult at the beginning and then they're getting out of it. Or like the vise versa, they are slowly getting indoctrinated. It's like the most tense journey of anything. Especially like, it's, it's like the thought process, which is much easier to do, like in a book than in a movie or a documentary series.

00;20;48;00 - 00;21;07;13

Cecilia

[CECILIA] You can have those, you know, to the camera, like talking about their process, feeling in that moment of Go wait, you know, this guy is actually making sense or like, I feel this way too. Or just seeing that thought process on the page is like, ah!

00;21;07;13 - 00;21;31;04

Kristen

[KRISTEN] I mean, that's right. With books, for the most part, you get an internal monologue or you get an idea into the character's true feelings and you can't get that any other way. There are very few ways that they can do that in cinema or in documentaries to be able to hear the internal struggle as it's happening. That's very powerful.

00;21;32;13 - 00;21;47;17

Chris

[CHRIS] I also feel like teens want to fit in, too. So when they're going to be like, Oh, what's going on? Like I read *Improbable Magic for Cynical Witches*, which isn't quite cult, it's like teen girls doing witchy stuff.

00;21;47;27 - 00;21;49;10

Cecilia

[CECILIA] I want to read that so bad! Sorry...

00;21;49;10 - 00;22;17;19

Chris

[CHRIS] But like, you see the protagonist watching it like no, like know what's going on, getting slowly pulled in, like, no, no, no. Like you're saying no, but you're not following up with actions of like them being like, oh, but like I like Pix, I like the group. Like I said, I wasn't going to be involved in these things, but like, I can hang out with them, as they're making like flower crowns and like getting ready for like all the different things.

00;22;17;19 - 00;22;23;12

Chris

[CHRIS] And I'm like, you're in the coven, like you're there. You say no, but, you're there.

00;22;23;25 - 00;22;47;17

Kristen

[KRISTEN] And as you join a cult, there comes a point where there's like a line. So like, you get, you have to choose. So you're making your flower crowns. You're like making new best friends. You're learning that maybe you fit in. And then there's a point in time, and it varies by organization, but there's a point in time where you have to decide, are you 100% in, or are you out?

00;22;47;27 - 00;23;14;05

Kristen

[KRISTEN] And that's why they feed you those, you get fed the friendship, right? So like, teens want to be part of something, and then you get to a point where you think you're part of it, but then you have to

choose are you for real? 100% in or goodbye? And that's a really hard decision when you want to have friends and you want to feel belonging and you want to feel all of those things, do I give it all away?

00;23;15;21 - 00;23;16;05

Kristen

[KRISTEN] I don't know.

00;23;16;16 - 00;23;23;14

Cecilia

[CECILIA] And the 100% in or out, like there's no gray area between. There's just like, you're in or out.

00;23;23;14 - 00;23;42;20

Kristen

[KRISTEN] There's not a lot of books or reality where you're just like, I'm part in a cult, just like, I do weekend cult stuff, but during the week, not in a cult. You don't get to be a weekend cultist. You have to join 100%.

00;23;42;27 - 00;23;47;27

Cecilia

[CECILIA] Yeah. And I also think that relates back to the, like, the tense moments. You're all in, or you're all out.

00;23;48;27 - 00;23;54;09

Chris

[CHRIS] Do you guys have any recommendations for YA titles with cults in it?

00;23;55;24 - 00;23;58;03

Cecilia

[CECILIA] Well, we talked about a bunch.

00;23;59;11 - 00;24;14;25

Chris

[CHRIS] Hell Followed With Us by Andrew Joseph White, fantastic, I loved it. I feel like I read, like, I read a bunch. I feel like I read them in, like, opposite order of severity, of like, the most cult, cult, down to like, it's like cult decaf.

00;24;15;20 - 00;24;16;28

Cecilia

[CECILIA] Cult decaf.

00;24;17;10 - 00;24;40;13

Kristen

[KRISTEN] I think it's there's an adult book. It's called Cultish, so you can call it cultish. And that one does go into the organizations where language is policed and changed and people have to buy in all the way

up to the big severe cults. And so cultish is kind of a way that people have adopted to talk about something that's like not a cult.

00;24;40;13 - 00;24;51;13

Kristen

[KRISTEN] So like the things at that bottom of your scale, it is not a cult. No one would call it a cult, but it's cult-like because it has some of the qualities of a cult. Yeah.

00;24;52;14 - 00;24;56;07

Chris

[CHRIS] Because like, *The Sacred Lies of Minnow Bly*, definitely a cult.

00;24;56;25 - 00;24;59;12

Kristen

[KRISTEN] Yeah. I'm so in on that. I need to read that book.

00;24;59;17 - 00;25;52;09

Chris

[CHRIS] Yeah. The first one I was like, *Benji* is turning into a monster, and there's a lot of dead people, post-Apocalypse, world ending. And then I'm like, oh, this is just like, a group of people out in the woods, look, it's not as bad. And then the next one I read was *Devoted* by Jennifer Mathieu, Mathieu, it's French and I still say it wrong every time, where the girl is, um, her family's fundamentalist, and like, part of the Quiverfull movement, and have, like, 11 kids and like apparently they do, and I'm like, you're in society, like you could just like walk out the door, and like, hi, other member that left that I'm in touch with. That, like, knows it and sees the outside like other people, other religions, like is aware. Stuff like that and was like a lot mellower compared to the other two. Like there's no body horror happening.

00;25;52;11 - 00;25;54;12

Kristen

[KRISTEN] That was a lot. Yeah.

00;25;55;05 - 00;26;01;09

Chris

[CHRIS] Was like, oh, this is like my family might disown me for leaving, and wearing pants. All right.

00;26;02;29 - 00;26;06;27

Kristen

[KRISTEN] But, for the person in the book, that's huge, right? Yeah.

00;26;07;08 - 00;26;46;20

Chris

Like, that's still such a huge, huge deal of like, using the computer to do something else, deciding to talk to somebody that left the religion, and like, she starts talking to a boy. So, like, also like that, like, oh, no, I'm talking to a boy. Like the level of severity of her sister pointing out like, hey, your white shirts kind of

old and a little see through, like, I can see your bra straps, was like world ending for her because, like, how she was raised, like, it was interesting. I did enjoy it. It was just like, a breather of like, no one is missing body parts.

00;26;47;25 - 00;27;16;13

Kristen

[KRISTEN] I would definitely recommend Agnes at the End of the World by Kelly McWilliams. I read this at the beginning of the pandemic, and it led me to other books because there is a recommendation in the acknowledgments of a real cult book and, like, a memoir of someone who had left a cult. And so this author had read that book and it was Escape (by Carolyn Jessop), and that inspired her to write her Y.A. book.

00;27;16;22 - 00;27;43;25

Kristen

[KRISTEN] So the protagonist leaves her cult at the beginning of a pandemic. There are lots of different varieties of cults, but one of the varieties of cult is a doomsday cult, and they believe that for whatever reason, many different reasons the world is going to end and they prophesize different ways that the world will end. And a lot of those include disease, some of them, including environmental factors and all of those different ways that the world could end.

00;27;44;03 - 00;28;34;09

Kristen

[KRISTEN] But this person is leaving a doomsday cult and she comes out into the rest of the world and it seems like the prophecies are happening. So she does a lot of internal struggle with Should I have left? Should I go back? Because if the thing that they say is really happening, shouldn't I be where we've always said we were protected? And there's, like, an added dimension, her brother has diabetes and has a need for insulin, and so there is a lot of caretaking of this brother. But also searching for the needed things during an end of the world seeming event. And also, now I'm with totally new people because I have escaped all I've ever known. So she does struggle a lot with, what if they were right?

00;28;34;16 - 00;28;55;07

Kristen

[KRISTEN] That's a fascinating thought for real life as well. Like if you're in a cult and you get out and then you start seeing the things that they said were going to happen, what if they were right? And I think that's one of the things that might keep people in these organizations, because we don't know the end of the real world.

00;28;55;16 - 00;29;10;21

Kristen

[KRISTEN] We don't know how it's going to go, and you don't know who's right. And so they start second guessing themselves. And Agnes at the End of the World does a great job of exploring the psychological aspects of leaving, but also, not knowing if leaving was the right answer.

00;29;10;21 - 00;29;35;28

Cecilia

[CECILIA] Yeah, that definitely sold me on that one. The Project, I mentioned it before, The Project by Courtney Summers. That is definitely good if you're really into true crime because she's delving into the cult and the back stories. I love the backstory about the leader that had the cult in this and it kind of went through the structure and you got to know the different members and stuff.

00;29;36;17 - 00;29;44;16

Cecilia

[CECILIA] And I'm counting Grown by Tiffany D Jackson as a cult book. Yeah, right. I definitely think it falls under cultish.

00;29;44;25 - 00;30;07;13

Kristen

[KRISTEN] We do not consider ourselves experts on cults and like that delineation between a cult and a strict ruled organization are murky. So I think it's fair to include Grown in this list. And it's just like a fabulous book, like, yes, on its own. So I think it's cool.

00;30;07;25 - 00;30;31;26

Cecilia

[CECILIA] That's another one where you see her kind of get indoctrinated and then you see other people that have already been where she ends up towards the end of the book where she's like full, full in, as we were talking about. But it's loosely based on R. Kelly, an R&B artist, sort of indoctrinating young girls into...

00;30;32;06 - 00;31;04;06

Kristen

[KRISTEN] One of their partners. Yeah, but yeah, I think that there's a lot of grooming in that book, and there was a lot of grooming in the real life case. I don't know where that distinction is, whether that's a cult or whether that's it feels more individual. Because like when you read that book, it feels like all of the women that were involved were not just isolated from their families and the greater world, but they were also very isolated from each other.

00;31;04;24 - 00;31;38;28

Kristen

[KRISTEN] So it's a much more individualistic experience. I don't think that that means that it's not a cult. I don't think that answers the question. But the feeling of Grown versus some of these other books, just it feels so much more like individual and personal, which makes it almost you feel like no one else has the experience that you had and like, what am I supposed to do? I didn't even graduate from high school. If I left, what would I even do or be? This person promised me so much and I don't know what I would do without them.

00;31;40;12 - 00;31;54;12

Cecilia

[CECILIA] Yeah, and that's another thing like relying on the organization or people that you're with, like, once you're out. There's no welcome back party. They're just like, you're gone, you're gone forever.

00;31;55;20 - 00;32;18;12

Chris

[CHRIS] Yeah, and you have to hope that you have people still around that will take you back that like, however isolated you are, are they still the same place, the same phone number? Most people don't have phone numbers memorized, so like, can you get your phone that you probably didn't have while you were there? Like, how do you start finding the people that you have left to be in the cult?

00;32;18;15 - 00;32;36;20

Kristen

[KRISTEN] Yes! And some of the manipulation of an abuser like in Grown is feeding you lies about what you would go back to. So when you have an abusive situation like that, they might say, your parents just let you come here. So clearly they don't even care.

00;32;36;28 - 00;32;37;05

Cecilia

[CECILIA] Yeah.

00;32;37;14 - 00;32;38;25

Kristen

[KRISTEN] Whether that's true or not.

00;32;39;17 - 00;32;54;29

Chris

[CHRIS] I think those are my three. Like, I was interested in reading Quiver, but didn't have a chance. That's another, like, fundamentalist girl leaving the organization, or similar to Devoted. If you read Devoted and liked that, check out quiverfull, or Quiver.

00;32;55;18 - 00;32;58;18

Kristen

[KRISTEN] I mean, I think we're leaving with a bunch of books on hold.

00;32;59;00 - 00;33;00;07

Cecilia

[CECILIA] Yeah.

00;33;00;07 - 00;33;11;02

Kristen

[KRISTEN] So, we read, we read books to talk about and now we talked about them and we're like, Oh, actually now I have other books I must read, which I feel like the podcast always helps me to find new books.

00;33;11;06 - 00;33;30;04

Cecilia

[CECILIA] This was the main reason I wanted to do this, because I wanted to read more cult books. I had only read like a few and I was like, I really, really want to read more, but I don't know anything that is good. So here is a podcast where we will find out what is good about cults.

00;33;30;24 - 00;33;38;14

Chris

[CHRIS] I read Hell Followed With Us, and I was like, I'll read other ones like this, read that, loved it. I watched Netflix's Wild, Wild Country.

00;33;38;27 - 00;33;41;20

Cecilia

[CECILIA] And well, now I have something to watch when I go home.

00;33;42;02 - 00;33;43;02

Chris

[CHRIS] The Guru Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh Osho.

00;33;43;02 - 00;33;45;12

Kristen

[KRISTEN] Oh yes,

00;33;45;29 - 00;34;04;09

Chris

[CHRIS] Rajneesh Osho. And like, that had a lot of celebrities that were getting involved in it and I really enjoy that. I do find stuff with cults interesting because just like the YA books, I just haven't read, it's just like part of the collection I haven't looked into. It's like, expand my knowledge.

00;34;05;21 - 00;34;09;18

Kristen

[KRISTEN] Fun fact, Jim Jones was a door to door monkey salesman.

00;34;10;20 - 00;34;25;16

Cecilia

[CECILIA] Thanks for joining us today. Be sure to check out the Ocean County Library's website for more podcasts and events. All titles mentioned in today's episode can be found at the Ocean County Library, free with your library card. Until next time, happy reading.