

**Waves of YA, Episode 7: Reading with Intent, Featuring Melody Simpson – Founder of Melanin in YA**

**Transcript:**

**Cecilia:**

Hello and welcome to Waves of YA

The podcast focused on Young Adult Literacy brought to you by the Ocean County Library Young Adult Literacy Work Group.

My name is Cecilia.

I'm one of the teen librarians at the Toms River branch. Joining me today, we have.

**Steven:**

I'm Steven from the Upper Shores Branch.

**Chris:**

And I'm Chris from the Lakewood Branch.

**Melody:**

And I'm Melody Simpson, the creator of Melanin in YA.

Your resource for all things black in young adult publishing.

**Cecilia:**

Today we have our featured special guest, Melody Simpson,

who is the founder of Melanin in YA. We will be looking into the founding of Melanin in YA

with a brief interview with the founder and followed up with a discussion

on what it means to read with intent. Thank you for joining us today, Melody.

**Melody:**

Thank you so much for having me.

This is really awesome, especially since you guys are from New Jersey.

I was born and raised in New Jersey, so I'm just really excited to be here and represent Jersey.

**Cecilia:**

Tell us, how did you decide to start Melanin in YA

and what is the database overall mission statement?

**Melody:**

I created Melanin in YA in August .

If you guys remember that dark time earlier in June 2020 ,

it all kind of came to

a head as far as the police

violence against black women and men just completely unnecessary

and with the culmination of those events

so amazing, the lack of support for the black community

and then on social media, mainly on Twitter,

you would see all of these book publishers and just people in the book industry

making statements to show their support

for black creatives, black lives.

But they didn't actually do anything outside of that.

It was kind of just blanket statements  
for no reason, really.

And so

I wanted to create

a database that was a no excuses database  
so that if you are going to put something out  
there, assume that you support us,

then you actually have to do it  
so that people can't say there are no black  
books about this,  
there are no black authors in this thing,  
there are no black editors, black agents.

None of that is true.

And so I created the database so that people  
can have one place to go to, like a hub to go to  
for everything that they need to support  
the black lives in this industry.

So as far as the overall mission, I essentially  
wanted to be a resource  
that's the premiere source for like global  
content  
for black readers.

But I want to start off  
just with traditional white publishing

since I'm just one person.

So it's hard to do all of that at once,  
but I'm going to start slow.

There are things that  
I don't yet want to announce because there

I kind of have like a ten year plan  
for Melanin in YA.

So I've got a lot in store for now.

I just wanted to be a place  
that people go to for information.

I want anybody to be able to go there,  
whether they're an aspiring writer,  
a librarian, a teacher, a publishing  
professional, or just a reader.

Anybody who needs information if they're  
looking for black cover designers or black  
audiobook narrators, whatever you need,  
I want it all to be in one space.

**Cecilia:**

I know one of the features I was  
looking at recently was the book release

schedule for and looking at all  
the new books that are coming out.

**Melody:**

Yeah, I'm really excited  
about what's coming out

and I'm especially excited  
about the debuts that are coming out.

We've got

some interviews that I want

one especially that I'm really looking  
forward to, is Monarch Rising by Harper Glenn

Then that comes out in October  
and we've got just so many debuts

every month and the debuts get

they get noticed a lot of love  
if they're a particular

kind of debut, like a cis white debut or

just a debut that's kind of like that

flashy one that everybody's talking about,  
whether it's new title or not.

But I want people to also remember  
to support the other debuts

that are out there,  
and especially if there's a book

coming out by a returning author  
who has a backlist

and everybody is focusing on that big book  
that comes out on that Tuesday.

Then they forget about the other books  
that are coming out.

So I just wanted to have  
a nice little release schedule there

so you can see everything that's coming  
out on that Tuesday that you're going

to go to the bookstore, go online  
and order those books that you want.

**Chris:**

What are some milestones  
that you've achieved with melanin in YA?

Any achievements  
that you are particularly proud of?

**Melody:**

I would say that

the biggest achievement

that I'm proud of is the Go Fund Me  
that we did last year.

We raised over \$ 24,000 for Melanin in YA

so that I would have startup costs  
for registering Melanin in YA

as an LLC for like featured things  
that I have planned, a marketing budget,

which was great  
because I was able to get ad space

for First Draft podcast  
with Sarah Eddie,  
which is really cool  
because I've been listening

to their podcast  
basically from the beginning,

so to be able to have an ad  
for Melanin in YA on there was pretty cool,

but just have a marketing budget  
and things like that.

It also helped with promotion on Instagram  
and Twitter.

That really does help actually

It gave me a portion of money  
for the trademark

trademarking is not cheap  
so that helped a lot

in setting up for e commerce inventory  
and so forth.

So I would say  
that was the greatest achievement so far.

And I'm looking forward to  
what's ahead.

I am hoping to open up an online  
shop this year and a subscription box  
this year.

I did want to do that last year,  
at least the store, but that got delayed.

I did get COVID myself.

I'm dealing with long COVID,  
so things got a little delayed last year,

but I'm back on track now  
and I'm really excited for what's ahead.

And I feel like as much as I have  
accomplished before Melanin in YA, it's

kind of hard to . . . it's kind of hard  
to think about what

I've achieved so far  
when I know in my head, like

I really haven't  
even touched the surface yet.

So some people are saying,  
Oh, you did this, you did that.

I'm like, Yeah, but

because I

just see like so much more happening.

So I do. That is a great question.

I do also have to like sit  
and think about what else I actually did

because people tell me all the time,  
but it kind of goes,

In one ear and out the other

I was like, No,  
but you don't understand

There's so much more coming.

So yeah, I do need to take more time  
to just sit

and really just be thankful  
for the people that do come to me,

whether it's via email  
or social media or whatever.

And they're like, Your website  
really helped me in those moments.

They come at the most incredible times  
because sometimes I'm working on the way

I am. Like, This is so hard.

There's a lot of information  
that I'm updating, and especially with

the long COVID, my fatigue has been  
just absolutely dreadful.

And so I know sometimes  
I feel like I'm behind,

but nobody else is really noticing,  
but I notice.

And so I do need to really just enjoy  
when people compliment Melanin in YA and

tell me when it helped them  
and just really see it.

It's working.  
It is working. It's doing its purpose.

And I need to live in that moment  
and appreciate that a little bit more  
that.

**Chris:**

Your gofundme in got funded in a couple of  
hours didn't it?

**Melody:**

Well that the we hit the halfway mark  
in a couple of hours

and like it that was so fast it was a lot faster than I thought it would.

I didn't even want to do it, honestly.

I was like,  
This is we're in the middle of a pandemic.

I was unemployed  
at the very beginning of the pandemic.

So I was like, I know other  
people are unemployed now, too.

And I was like,  
I feel weird asking for money right now.

And I did not I did not want to do it,  
but I was like, I need money for this.

And so my friends were like, Just do it.

You'll get the support.  
And I was like, okay.

So I did it reluctantly, but I'm very glad  
I did.

I was floored, truly just floored  
by the amount of support the book

community is something special I'll say  
that they really are amazing awesome.

**Steven:**

Okay. So our next question,  
what can our listeners do to support you  
at your website?

**Melody:**

Well, I would say  
word of mouth is so, so important.

I don't think people realize  
how much power they have

when they just talk  
about the things that they love.

And so whether it's talking about it,  
when you're

in your daily life, at work,  
at the grocery store, at the bookstore

or wherever you are out in real life,  
even if it's limited right now, if it

the opportunity  
naturally arises to mention Melanin in YA

please be sure to do that.

You're on social media,

whether it's a tweet or an Instagram story  
or something, to just spread the word

about Melanin in YA if you want to donate  
once, you can do so.

There is a link on our website  
if you want to support us

financially monthly we have a page on  
and the Patreon.

If you support a certain level,  
you get a passion box.

You get a book every other month  
after you support for six months

and just a book and other things in there.

So far I've gotten nothing but amazing

responses from the boxes that I do,  
so that's really exciting.

But yeah, I would say just word of mouth  
when we open up.

I say we but it's me.

when I open up the online

shop and I'm hoping to open up the online shop in the next month or two.

So that would be a great way to support as well.

It would just be like mugs and coasters and tote bags and t shirts, stuff like that.

That would be a great way to support as well.

**Steven:**

I was just going to ask what kinds of stuff you were planning on having in your shop?

And I'm glad that it's, you know, things like mugs because I'm like,

you know, can I get myself some melanin in YA swag, right?

Like I want a t shirt. I want that.

That's amazing. I really can't wait for that to launch.

That's going to be a really great feature.

In addition to all the amazing features that this database has already so

we'll get really looking forward to that.

**Melody:**

Thank you so much. And it was funny because

the people who are on the patreon and who do get the boxes,

over the past year and since the world the past few months, I would say

since the gofundme, I've been able to like get,

I would say sample products for the inventory to see

because I want to feel it before I sell it obviously.

And so some things were like so incredible

and like using that once and sometimes they would get like

an early, whatever, an early version of that.

So some of the patreon people, they already have some of the swag already

and then there's something that didn't quite turn out well.

The first time I ordered

a sample of a coaster, it was just like

it felt like just a cardboard thing, like this is not.

And then the second time I heard it from a completely different place

and it looked like it was \$ worth quality wise.

And so that's been interesting.

But also like kind of play around and talk to the Patreon people support

and be like, Hey, what do you think?

So that's been pretty fun  
to go back and forth and get

feedback, really feedback for that.

Before I actually started selling stuff.

And I'm also really excited  
about the magnets that are coming.

There's a lot coming

That's amazing.

**Steven:**

Do you know roughly about how many people  
you currently have?

that subscribe to your Patreon.

**Melody:**

That's a good question.

I believe we're just under the  
people mark but it's just

I think I think I need to one  
or two more people in the people.

So I would love to double that this year.

That would be a great goal.  
So fingers crossed on that.

**Cecilia:**

So our topic for today  
is reading with intent.

So anybody can answer this question,  
these questions,

how would you define  
reading with intention?

So we'll start with our special guest  
Melody first and then we'll go around.

**Melody:**

Reading with intention

that it's always been  
and important to me, but it's always been  
kind of

a natural thing for me  
because my parents are both creatives

and they've always given me books

that make me think outside of the box.

And so for me, I would hope

that reading with intention

would mean to make it a focus point  
to just read widely,

especially I'm a writer,  
so especially as writers,

I feel like any writer listening  
is kind of doing themselves a disservice

by not reading widely and not learning from as many different creative

mediums as they can.

So as far as what that actually entails,

I would say let's start with text.

Are you only reading novels or are you reading short stories,

novellas, anthologies, graphic novels, manga, poetry, plays, screenplays

like you have to really dig around and then on to genre.

I mean, obviously anybody can be whatever they want to read, but are you also

reading different genres within fiction, different genres within nonfiction?

Don't forget about nonfiction because there's a ton of great, great stuff

that you can learn from nonfiction, especially if you're doing research.

You don't want to just read nonfiction when you're doing research for stuff.

You also read outside of that as well.

And then when it comes to format, are you only reading books

that are physical copies or e-book copies. Or.

Are you also listening to audiobooks?

I mean, yeah, I'll admit audiobooks are hit or miss

if the narrator is not, you know, quite hit the mark for you.

But if you find that audiobook narrator that you love, like

hold on to them, listen like Google them and see what other books

that they've narrated so that you can keep up with those books

that you enjoy listening to because nobody wants to listen to a book for hours.

If it's not by and not read, you don't hear.

But yeah, I only read new books that come out.

Or are you also reading backlist especially.

Especially the as a writer and even as a reader, I think it's fun to



read books  
by some of my favorite authors now

and see what they wrote earlier on  
to see not only how their writing grew,

but how their expansion of the world grew.

So that's kind of fun to see.

And then also like,  
are you only reading books

that are coming out by like the big five  
or four or whatever it is now

or are you also reading indie publishers?

Are you reading books by other people,  
by Bipoc authors, indigenous

authors, where people from backgrounds  
that are not just your own work, that

explores neurodiversity, disability,

religion, that are not your own,  
just reading widely.

So it entails for me, it entails a lot.

I know for a while there

YA was kind  
of really stuck on trilogies.

But are you reading duologies?

I'm reading standalones like reading  
widely entails so many things.

And reading with you,  
reading with intention entails

making sure that you are doing your part  
to not just read.

You know YA fantasy or YA contemporary for  
like the whole year?

You know, that's my very long answer.

**Cecilia:**

I love that you mentioned

audiobook narrators because that has  
definitely opened up for me.

I've put myself through a narrator  
and I've read everything that they've

narrated  
and opened up a bunch of different genres.

For me, this is I like their voice.

**Steven:**

For, for me reading with intention  
I think of it from the perspective of

like the actual book that you're planning  
on, like, you know,

reading in that moment,  
kind of like setting yourself up

for what you're hoping to get out  
of that experience of reading that book.

And I see a couple of different examples  
like for me, like sometimes like

if I'm having like a really bad day,  
like, really like a lot of stuff

going on in my life,

I'll turn to a book

that I've read so many times because  
I know exactly what to expect from it.

Like I know how it's going to end,  
I know how it's going to make me feel.

So I am, you know,  
putting myself in the position

which just like, you know, okay,  
like I feel pretty down right now.

So I'm going to do  
the thing that like makes me happy.

But on the flip

side of that, also, you know,  
if it's a book that I haven't read yet or

if it's something on a topic  
that I might not know a lot about,

you know, my intention of reading that is  
that I'm hoping to gain a new experience.

I'm hoping to learn something from that.

So it's about kind of like  
setting up for yourself.

Like what? Like what are your goals?

What are your plans for that  
journey through that book?

And if the answer is you don't know that,  
you don't know like what to expect,

that's fine too.

You can just go in like blindly surprise.

Like so like I've started recently  
just reading books, like,

without even reading the synopsis.

I'm just like, you know what? Like,

what's the worse that happens?

I don't like it. I can stop it.

And, you know, I can also just finish it even if it's not my jam.

But just just finish it.

You never know what you're going to get from it.

You're going to take something away from every book.

And if you say that you like don't get something from a book, you know,

you're you're lying

because you get something from it, even if it's not exactly what you're expecting.

So for me, that's that's what I think of when I think about reading with intention.

I think about, you know, what exactly are you hoping

to take away from that?

**Melody:**

I love that. Yeah.

**Chris:**

For me, reading with intention is like thinking about what you're reading

and also paying attention

to what you're reading, like in school when you read with intention,

you're like, What am I getting out with this aiming for?

I'm writing a paper. But now as an adult, I'm not writing papers.

So what am I missing?

And what I'm reading all through high school I read YA fantasy

and I was like pretty formulaic back then.

Like, you knew what you were getting

and now I'm like, there's so much more that I haven't read

and there's just so much more being published where I'm like,

I want this and I want this.

And then I'm like, Alright, well I've read five YA fantasy books because that's always my go to

But all the protagonists were like  
totally different,

different races, different religions,  
different sexualities.

Like this is cool, but so fantasy,  
so like to be like,

what is the last time you read  
realistic fiction?

Go read one of those.

And I'm also on the reference  
desk with the adults.

I'm like, Oh, I have no idea  
what's going on in adult publishing.

ever

it's like trying to like force myself  
to read something adult to be like,

I can give you a book recommendation  
from something I've read.

So like, let me use one of our resources  
to give you a recommendation instead.

So knowing where your blindspots are,  
I cannot help you

if you want adult mystery  
but I'm trying to be better about that

and knowing like where you need work

and then going reading it,  
or at least reading summaries.

**Cecilia:**

Yeah, I'm  
definitely the opposite of you. Chris.

I read more realistic fiction.

I need to read more fantasy.

**Chris:**

I have recommendations for you.

**Cecilia:**

And there you go, and then we help  
each other out that way, you know.

**Chris:**

What do you readers gain  
when they read with intention?

I would say.

I mean, we've all heard that bit about

how books are mirrors that reflect

the world we see and us,

and then windows help us observe  
and appreciate the world around us.

It's so true  
whether or not you are creative.

If you're looking to expand your mind  
and grow as a human being,

reading is one way to do that  
and I feel like choosing

not to read widely  
if you're able to take advantage of that,

it's kind of like you're  
taking for granted the freedom that comes

with challenging yourself  
to think about the world, how it operates,

and your place in that operation,  
so to speak.

I would say reader,  
you know, gain knowledge and compassion

and an expansion of their imagination.

When you choose to read widely,  
it forces you to think

and forces you

to make a choice and not stand by  
when other people are put inside

the institutions in real life  
because of ignorance and discrimination,

because you've allowed yourself  
to read across

different mediums in various ways,  
and you're teaching yourself

in different ways  
how to react in real life.

And I think that's a skill and a gift

that is definitely not to be taken  
for granted.

**Cecilia:**

I think readers definitely gain empathy  
when reading with intent.

When you're reading someone  
that's not like themselves, you're

stepping into someone else's shoes.

You know what?

If the story is told in first person, you

are feeling out the character,  
you're there.

What's their life, what's the story,  
their family background or religion?

Sexuality.

You're just in there  
in that character's mindset.

And I think it definitely

besides being mirrors, it

grows empathy towards  
other groups of people, too.

**Steven:**

No, I agree with that.

With what you're saying Cecilia.

Yeah, definitely.

You gain new experiences,  
you gained a different perspective

that you may not have known or one  
that you just never could experience.

Like, you know, for example, just today

I finished reading Felix ever  
after the story about, you know, a trans

black teenager and,  
you know, as a cisgender

white male, like,  
I can't, you know, necessarily identify

with with that, but reading his story  
from his perspective, at least,

I'm able to have a glimpse into his life.

And, you know, what he's experiencing yet.

And, you know, I feel I've just gained  
a different perspective.

And now I'm really glad that I had that  
experience with that, with this character.

So, you know, these experiences are really

what's important  
that, you know, what you can really gain.

**Cecilia:**

I think it's  
especially important for YA books too

because teens brains are developing  
at this period in time

and like kind of showing them  
these stories of people

that are other than themselves  
will push that empathy in their head

and make them,  
you know, grow into adults in the future

that have strong empathy.

**Steven:**

Yeah, I agree with that.

A lot of the books  
that I've been reading recently,

I've had more than one occasion  
that I've like felt like I've

said to myself like, wow, I really wish

I had had this book when I was a teenager

because, you know, we're all like you  
said, it's such a formative time.

We're all figuring things out.

And, you know,  
having all those different opportunities

to gain all those different experiences  
is so, so important.

And, you know, opening yourself up  
to such a wide variety of different

stories that journeys is so important  
in helping develop your own identity.

I would say.

**Chris:**

I agree with the definitely empathy.

And also, like teenagers, their bubble  
could only be just where they live,

where they've never met anyone  
that didn't grow up like them,

live in the same town  
as them, has never gone out.

So the chance to see worlds, many parts  
of the world that they've never seen,

which where could just be like

a minute car ride from them  
depending on where they live,

where it's like totally,  
totally different.

They're like,  
oh, like where we are.

We're like New York's only an hour  
and a half, but that doesn't mean

Everyone's gone to New York.

And then like they're in our area

so they can see different lifestyles and

have this chance to interact with people  
that are different than them,

even if they can't physically go anywhere  
from where they currently are.

And also think about like other people's  
experiences and see that as well.

Maybe  
like they're the only person in their town

that like I'm the only LGBTQ person  
that I know of in my small town.

But hey, there's books. I'm not alone.

There's other people with me.

Those a chance for them to see like,  
yeah, I'm here, but the world is bigger

and more people out there like me

or they're different for me to make it  
how they're feeling.

**Melody:**

That's such a great point that you  
mentioned that because it reminds me of

when I was younger.

I'm originally from Maplewood,  
but I moved a lot around, a lot in my life

and neighborhood is wildly diverse.

Like I was just so lucky there and then.

And I was also

an avid I've always been an avid reader  
as I was always an avid reader as well.

In addition to that.

And then going from that to I also.

Moved for a very brief. Amount of time.

We were not there long to Howell,  
which was like completely white.

There was only four black people  
in my entire school at that time

and the other  
one of the other person was my sister.



It was just they were all very sheltered.

They were not reading  
whether it was a child or an adult or not.

They were not as far as I came  
across, big readers.

So it was kind of like a two  
for one in a sense that they were not

getting that knowledge and that experience  
and that just anything.

They were not getting any, any life,  
just being in that sheltered environment.

So even if you are in a neighborhood  
that's like

only one kind of group of people,  
at least if you're reading,

at least if you have those books,  
you can take yourself there.

If you're not able to hop on the train  
and go to New York or wherever you need to

go, the books will help you in that time

that you're not able to go out.

**Steven:**

So what is your experience  
with reading, with intention?

Are there any books that you discovered by  
doing this?

**Melody:**

Well, my dad is a comic book

illustrator  
and he does that kind of stuff.

So I've always kind of

and then my mom sings,  
but I've always kind of been

handed books that are

either books  
for black little kids like me,

or just books that were not white

focused on white people

or just different mediums,  
different ways to read.

And so it never really occurred to me  
to read any other kind of way.

And so it's hard to kind of

answer this question,  
but I will say that as I grew

older, there were some times  
where I'm very much a mood reader.

And so instead of kind of just reading  
whatever I wanted to read,

I would make it a point  
where I would say, okay,

for the month of January,  
I'm only reading graphic novels.

For the month of February, I'm only  
reading memoirs. For the month of March.

I'm only reading this.

And so I could still be a mood reader,  
but I would have

a focus point in, in reading more  
graphic novels over the years

because I didn't really quite  
read them at first

because I was like, Oh,  
my dad does comics.

Like that's his job.

And I was like, That's his world,  
you know?

Like, I don't,  
I don't need to be a part of that,

which was hysterical because I went,  
I grew up going to comic conventions

all the time coming around me  
my entire life.

I was like, That's his thing, you know?

But if you're reading with intention  
to read widely,

then you can find out things  
about yourself that you didn't realize.

I found out that I particularly,  
I am not moved by YA

contemporary necessarily  
but if you put it in a graphic novel,

I'll go through that so fast  
and I will love it.

And so I found that I kind of like

different genres in different  
if they're presented in a certain way.

So I think just playing around  
with reading different

things, different ways  
will help you open up your self.

So I think it's really about  
just discovering how you can best

take in information was was my discovery.

**Cecilia:**

So when I first accepted this job,

I was getting into reading again  
and I came upon

from *Twinkle with Love* by Sandhya Menon and  
the main character

is going to film school  
and that's what I went to school for.

So I kind of connected that way.

And then I started getting into

being interested in the culture  
that's involved in it,

and I ended up kind of going  
through her whole collection.

And at that point I was like, Well,

I really enjoy learning  
about different cultures.

What else is there by Southeast  
Asian writers?

So I got into a Match

Made in Mehendi and read just

everything about different cultures,  
listening to audiobooks

with different narrators  
that are also own voices

and got really into reading  
a lot of own voices stories

and realized that I actually really  
like contemporary romance

as well, which is not what I was into  
when I was younger.

I was more into the paranormal fantasy.

*Twilight* books made me realize  
I have a different writing,

reading intention as an adult as I did  
when I was a teenager.

Now it's discovered a wide range of books  
that way for me.

**Steven:**

I only really got into

YA somewhat recently because I come from a children's background.

I've been a children's librarian

for about five years now and only recently have I in a role

where I still do children's, but I also do YA so it's something that I never I kind of

in my own life, I have just skipped over that phase of my reading journey.

I kind of went straight from like middle grades to basically just like adult books.

And even then, like, not really.

I just I somewhere along the way, I kind of like lost my love for reading.

It wasn't until I

came to the library and started working that I kind of rediscovered that love.

So only recently have I really like been diving into YA

from for me kind of the turning point was you know

it's just like looking for you know different popular Y.A.

books. I was kind of just like making my way through them.

And I got to Heart Stopper by Alice Holzman, her graphic novel series.

And at first, like, I really loved it just because it was like

really cute and like really fluffy and it just made me happy.

But as I started, like, go through it, she's up to her fourth volume now.

She just published her fourth volume.

I had never felt so

it sounds like a cliché, but I never felt so seen before

until I got to that fourth edition because it deals with a lot

of mental health stuff, which, you know, I have my own journey with that.

So it was like really I had just never felt so moved by a book

before that truly and just never in that way before.

So from there, you know, I just it's like I felt such a connection with it.

And then for me that really kind of launched me to my love for graphic novels.

I devoured so many graphic novels, too, and also I've devoured

a lot of LGBT books, a lot of queer literature.

It's really kind of

set me on a journey with that, and I've just been devouring it ever since.

So, so yeah.

So I definitely kind of goes back to what I said a little bit earlier about

just like these are the books I just wish that I had growing up at

when I was younger.

And not to say that they weren't there, but just, you know,

not quite on the level that it is now.

I feel like more and more

we're seeing such a wide variety of topics, a wide variety of voices.

And yeah, it's really amazing what one piece of literature could do,

like how it can set you on this kind of journey.

**Chris:**

For me, when I was like a teenager reading, I wanted like that

escapism of fantasy of like the girl gets to go away to a whole different world.

And now I'm like, I have read that one a million times.

And with anything like realistic fiction, like

working female protagonist in like the school falls in love,

I'm like I have lived this,

I don't want to go back to high school, go back to middle school

it happened. I don't want it. So now I'm like I want other people's experiences.

I already lived this.

I want to see from other people's perspectives.

And like especially with fantasy, like so much of this is like Greek mythology

and like Arthurian legend where I'm like, I know where this is going.

I read different versions of this in high school.

So like the fact that there's so much more diverse, like,

I'm going to keep coming back to fantasy because that's what I read a lot of, like cultures

and like mythologies that are out there that weren't getting attention

before, I'm like, I don't know where this is going.

I can't tell you the end from the first chapter.

Like getting to see that and like getting to experience other people's

perspectives is great and like

it feels like fantasy opened up for like way further.

It was for me where I'm like, there's so much more out there

and there's so much more being published that you can get a hold of easily.

Now where I'm like, Yes, give me more.

Like I'm no longer like,

burned out on fantasy and like it went back to like starting

to read some realistic fiction to where I'm like, cool.

There's like other protagonists.

It's not like I'm a quirky, like, white girl,

like, yes, give me other things.

And, like, being able to give to you.

Just do other things like read this.

**Melody:**

I love that you mentioned different perspectives

and kind of like I read this all before in high school

because when you do go back and you read  
YA books,

you get to see how other people's  
high school experiences were.

Because we are in we are in tunnel vision  
when we're in high school, it is all about us.

Nobody else matters.

So we have friends that we care  
but don't really know what's happening

in their lives. No.

And so to read these books,  
especially contemporary books,

where it's just basics down to the basics,

you strip away  
all of the fantastical elements of it.

And we just get focused  
on the reality of the situation.

This is what I'm going through.

And if you read certain books,  
they're like,

Oh my God, you might realize

something that happened in your life  
that you may have completely ignored,

or you might have a connection  
with somebody else

and you kind of see in a sense  
what they were going through

that you didn't even really think about  
until you read this book.

And so

I think that definitely helped  
because we finally begin to understand

the people closest to us or around us,  
or if they're not close to us anymore,

we still have better understanding  
of what they may have gone

through in a time where we had no idea  
what they were going through

and they may have been sitting right next  
to us in English class, that whole year.

We didn't know, you know.

So it's a gift to be able to

to have that knowledge,  
even if it's later in life,

it's still a gift to be able  
to get that knowledge.

What are the larger benefits to society?

Reading with intention?

I know we kind of touched on that  
a little bit. Yes.

So while we did touch on a bit,  
I do want to add

we can kind of think to kind of split  
the question a little bit.

We can kind of see the of people  
who don't read

widely or with intention  
because it's happening right now.

Books are getting banned by black YA  
authors

just because they're black

and they have nothing,  
nothing to do with anything

that needs to be banned or held,  
whatever that means.

But because white people are so  
not everybody, but these people

who are intentionally trying to ban  
these books are so intent

on not having the truth be shared.

Because we all know knowledge is power.

We all know people share truth in writing,

in books,  
and they are so terrified of the truth

of what white people have done in the past  
to be spread in these books.

So they're just going to burn them all.

And so I think the benefit

of reading with intention  
is understanding what you're trying to be.

And first of all, realizing  
that there's no reason.

There's no reason to ban it.

The people  
probably have not read a single,

book since *Gone Girl* came out,  
you know what I'm saying?



So they have no idea  
what's happening with these books,

especially with YA books.

The last time they picked up  
a YA book,

probably right before The Hunger Games  
came out, right before Twilight.

No, you know,  
those big monster blockbuster hit books

that everybody has to read  
before the movie comes out.

But they're not actual readers  
and they don't understand

what's involved in these stories.

And so I kind of talked about kind of  
went on a little tangent here.

But yeah, I think you definitely have to

open up a book before you can

understand what

benefit or danger is being presented  
with the book.

Sure.

**Chris:**

I love it's like being more aware  
of like outside of your own bubble

and like knowing there's more out there

and seeing like the more you experience

anything is different in your own life,

the more you understand a bit,  
the more empathy you do have

and the more understanding

you have for other people  
and what's going on and the more you care.

It's like seeing something on  
the news is like really removed from you.

But as soon as you make

any kind of personal connection, you're  
like, I care because now this affects me.

So by reading diverse books  
and reading with intention, it helps bring

whatever's on the news that could be  
happening across the country me.

Now you feel it  
and have a connection to it,

and now you care more and are more likely  
to go out and do something

either by donating or helping out anywhere  
that you can and being another voice

to support anything  
like anything that causes.

So that way  
more people are involved and the more news it  
gets

to get the more of affect  
things are going to have.

**Steven:**

But yeah, just with everything going  
on, it's so clear

that there's such a lack of empathy  
and a lack of understanding,

whether it's intentional or unintentional.

And books are just such a great medium  
for learning about other people, learning

about different experiences in, a way  
that might get the message across.

Like there's so many different types  
of books, some a difference

between nonfiction and fiction, and even  
just the types of books I've written.

Like, you know,  
there's a type of book for everyone.

So even if you're the type of person  
that thinks like, well, like I'm

not the type person

that can gain an understanding from a book  
because I don't like them.

I don't understand them,  
whatever the reason might be,

you know, there's  
so many different mediums

that like surely, surely,  
one of these will connect with you

and surely will give you that perspective  
that you're needing.

So. So, yeah, I think,

I think that's definitely the benefit is  
that we really can all get that empathy.

that we all so desperately need,  
especially right now.

**Cecilia:**

Yeah,  
I think it's important to tell stories

that are both hard to hear  
and joyful stories

to because those are two different sides  
of the same experience.

Making sure to read both those stories,  
even if they're hard to hear

sometimes are hard to read  
that that's important as well.

**Chris:**

How can reading with intention  
help to promote

diverse books to readers  
that are new to reading diversity?

**Melody:**

Once you have a book that you have read

and are willing to talk about  
to other people as long as they are

willing to take that recommendation,  
that will keep happening.

So you have to choose to read outside  
of what you're comfortable with.

And then once you like that, read  
the book, be like the book.

You have a responsibility.

So to speak, to talk about it  
so that other people can read those books

and have those books in your hands.

I've been reading Rise Up How You Can

Join the Fight Against White Supremacy  
by Dr.

Crystal M. Fleming

And it's taking me a while to go through  
because it's a nonfiction book.

It's so much to unpack, but I cannot wait  
and I kind of am already talking about it

because it's just so good and I just can't  
wait to keep talking about it even more.

So, yeah.

You've got to make sure that you are  
spreading the word about this book.

I know we all hate Amazon,  
but leaving reviews

because those reviews  
actually matter to people.

So leave those reviews on Amazon,  
barnesandnoble.com, wherever

you buy the book so that people can see  
that not only are people reading the book,

but they love it so much that they took  
the time out of their day to review it.

And that is so important.

So definitely word of mouth helps promote

diverse books,  
especially since most of the time

when we are talking about word of mouth  
books, it usually is, you know, it usually

are those blockbuster type of books.

But at that point, everybody has already  
heard about the book.

So it's important  
to not just put that enthusiasm into,

you know, those big books,  
but also into the books that you're

reading every day  
that you come across for sure.

**Cecilia:**

Yeah, I know.

Every time I read something  
I really enjoy, I just won't shut up about

it. And I always make sure  
when I'm doing displays at the library

to include diverse books,  
sometimes I have a hard time,

including other stuff on there because  
there's so many diverse books out there.

And then when kids come into the library

looking for something,  
I make sure I recommend them.

Authors that either write in the genre  
or the girls coming in

for a romance that I pick up Nicola Yoon  
and I like this.

She is a romance writer.

You can pick any single one of hers  
Marie Lu

and I would make sure to promote  
to the people I have it at,

at my doorstep, at my clutches,  
throw books at them.

**Steven:**

Yeah.

I think also speaking  
from the perspective of us as librarians,

you know, it kind of all starts with us,  
especially in our roles and working with

teens, we're promoting diverse books  
that we're recommending, diverse books

that are promoting the idea of reading  
with intention like it starts with us.

So like,

we need to make sure that we're  
doing our due diligence and making sure

that we're reading with intention  
and and exposing ourselves to

as many of these types of books  
as possible.

Now, granted,  
that's not very difficult for especially,

especially us because, you know, we  
we love to read it.

That's why that's one of the many reasons  
we're in this profession.

But really, knowing the books that are  
in our collection that we have to offer,

knowing these different authors,  
knowing these different genres

and not just knowing, like,  
you know, a couple of a couple of key

authors off the top of your head  
or like a couple of like titles here

and that, like, that's good.

That's a good start,  
especially if you're kind of overwhelmed.

Like, especially when I first started,

I was like,  
I don't really know much about YA.

So that was a good starting point for me.

But now that I'm really, reading  
with intention,

that I really opened myself up  
and allowed myself to experience

these new experiences,  
now I feel like I'm able to confidently

like obviously  
I've been promoting diverse books before,

but now I feel like I can confidently  
now that I'm actually

like really digesting them  
and taking them in, I can recommend them

with a new kind of understanding.

**Melody:**

Yeah, I think that's so important,  
especially as librarians.

My high school librarian, she created  
a book club and I was in a book club

and she would read

with intention  
and recommend with intention.

Every few weeks  
she would come to me with a book

that had a black character,  
main character in it, or near

supporting character,  
and that was very relevant story.

And the book was always written  
by a person of color.

And this was

a while ago.

So for someone

back then to be doing that,  
I've just been so lucky in that sense.

I know everybody doesn't have that, but  
librarians are so important when it comes

to recommending books. Like the power,

the power that you have to change

so many lives  
just by putting a book in their hands.

It's just bananas.

It's is magic.

It really is.

**Chris:**

For me, it's when I read a book,  
I tend to think of like what bigger series

it connects to because we always have  
the customers, especially for me.

We have like some real intense readers  
where I'm like, You've read

everything that's come out somehow.  
All right, like you've read The Hunger Games.

You read Divergent,  
you've read like all the big name series.

All right.

Here's something that you haven't heard  
of a million times in the news.

And like, I look for books and I'm like,  
this matches to this popular books

so like

you read that, you liked it

This is really similar.

Here's why it's similar.

And then like then they're reading things  
that they wouldn't like necessarily.

It's still the genre you want.

It's still like the same like themes,  
but you've got diverse

protagonists  
that you wouldn't have been reading

if you hadn't been thinking about them  
necessarily or going for them,

or even really noticed that you weren't  
reading

a whole chunk of books  
that match the same themes.

So I've been using that to be like, Hey,  
oh, you like this cute romance?

Here's another cute romance.

And like, matching them up with, like,  
these things you like.

You like character driven.

This is character driven.

Read them.

And like,  
once that door gets like cracked open,

you can start like being like here,  
you read that.

And now this book is so much in that book  
that you got recommended

was similar to this book

and now you're going off  
into the world of reading even more

books are more diverse  
than you had really thought of.

When you're like,  
I want another Hunger Games.

**Cecilia:**

I can imagine with that.

Like a web or Venn diagram.

I mean, it's circled within circles.

I'm like, Well,  
this is like The Hunger Games, too.

This is the divergent.

Mix those together you get this

**Chris:**

Start putting like the

series on the wall  
maps like this is how they're connected.

I promise there's some relation.

Even though you're like six books out  
at this point.

**Cecilia:**

I definitely will.

If kids come in  
and though they recommend the book to me,

I will definitely like to be like,  
Oh, what?

What is this about?

Or if they come in  
and they're looking for a specific genre,

I'll start kind of reading in that genre  
to see if I can

get some more recommendations  
for them as well.

And create book lists and displays.

We have an LGBTQ display here,  
so I can kind of see

what types of books keep going out  
and read more of those.

**Chris:**

Read what the kids are reading.

I've enlisted a couple of my teens  
to do some of my reading



for me now or I'm like,  
I figured out we like this is similar.

Read this and get back to me on what you  
what you feel about it.

At one point I'm like,  
I don't have time to read this.

Like we have, like because we have  
multiple librarians on our desk for YA

or like we have a list for like, hey,  
this kid is looking for more of these

these and we'll add things like running  
lists to be like, Hey, you came last time.

and we only had like three books.

However, we combined three different  
people's brains and we have books.

So I definitely love, like love  
making book lists from like here.

You started here and now  
we're very far from we started like.

**Cecilia:**

I love when kids leave, they ask for one  
specific book and we don't have it.

And then they leave with books.

Because.

We didn't have the one book that they had.

**Melody:**

That's amazing.

I love that. As someone who has been there,  
I love walking out with that stack.

**Cecilia:**

I love watching kids walk by either

from the manga section or like they're  
checking out every single romance

from something  
they have. Like the entire series.

And just seeing that and a little bit  
where we're used to be, just be like,

Well, I guess someone checked out  
all of my Naruto

again.

**Steven:**

What changes have you noticed in the books

being published  
once you started reading with intention?

**Melody:**

Well not necessarily,

When I started reading with intention,  
that's been a through line for me.

But I will say that in recent years,

once publishers started making

intentional choices for business choices,

I've noticed that

Nicola Yoon and David  
Yoon, they have an imprint now,

a YA romance imprint  
specifically for bipoc authors like.

That's incredible

that you would not have seen that  
if certain things hadn't happened,  
unfortunately.

I believe Kwame Alexander has an imprint  
VERSIFY.

and even Rick Riordan has an imprint

that specifically is there to highlight other  
cultures,  
because we all know the Greek mythology

stories, but other cultures have mythology  
stories too.

So for him to do that,

he knows,  
he knows his influence in this industry

and he did something about it  
and that's incredible.

So I would say people who know  
their influence, know their power

and do something with that power,  
that is incredible.

And that's what I've noticed in the past  
handful of years.

People who are being offered  
these opportunities, finally long overdue

opportunities for who have been there for  
God knows how long.

And this is white males and they know,  
hey, I can do something about this

and they actually help  
and they're true allies.

So I've just noticed people who are true allies stepping up

and doing the work in a big way,

but not being like, sorry about it.

Like I did this, I did that.

there's kind of nothing worse than an ally who's like, Hey, I'm.

I'm a good ally, right?

Just, you know, be quiet.

Do the work and the work will speak for itself.

Yeah, that's that's what I would say.

I've noticed over the past few years.

**Steven:**

I would say that one thing I've noticed just kind of like looking at like

the new books that they come in, especially like over the past year or two.

I feel like this younger generation, like

I feel like they're a lot more open

and willing to discuss a lot more things.

So I find that in a good way.

I feel like a lot of the books that come in like really aren't afraid

to tackle those really difficult issues, especially like the amount of books

that we see coming in that specifically talk about

the black experience, Black Lives Matter, you know, police brutality,

all these things that have been at the forefront in the recent past.

It's so great to see these stories.

It's obviously not great that there is a specific need for these stories.

But but the fact that they're able to release these stories

and tell these stories and aren't afraid to have

these conversations and to open up people's minds

and even not just that, other topics as well, it's a really great thing.

And and not to say that other authors  
or books haven't tackled difficult issues,

but just now it's great to see that  
they're really focusing on current events

and it's putting the world  
around us into a different kind

of perspective through this medium,  
which I think is a really cool and

The important thing.

**Cecilia:**

One of the things I've been noticing  
talking about books

coming in  
is the covers have been different.

Seeing black characters on the covers,  
even thinking about the Nicola Yoon's

Everything, Everything that was didn't  
have the black protagonists on the cover.

And now seeing one of the more recent  
books

has one of the most beautiful covers

I've ever seen, This Poison Heart has a  
black girl on the cover

like and the seeing more  
and more of representation

literally in your face on the cover

is just absolutely beautiful.

**Chris:**

Yes, definitely seeing the covers  
and like the change in the covers and also

just the amount of names and authors  
that are out there.

Like I feel like when I was like  
a teenager and a kid, there's like five

all I can think of that were black and  
and now I'm like, there's a ton.

There's  
so many more diverse others out there.

And also I feel like  
the ones were getting promoted around.

The kid was like Writable and Garcia  
and Walter Dean Myers, who are fantastic  
writers,

but they were like hard, like, hard  
life, like this is what it's about.

Like dark and gritty.

And you're like, Well,  
I don't want to read that.

But then like  
now there's like a ton of black authors

and like we have all those  
that are hitting all those things.

And we also have authors like

Nicola Yoon who's like,  
It's just cute, fluffy romance.

Don't be like,  
Oh, this is the only thing you're seeing

in representation  
of a whole bunch of other stuff too.

You can have just a cute romance.

You can have like a fantasy protagonist.

Like, I really enjoyed the Dread Nation  
where I'm like, Yes, go.

And some zombies in like. Yeah.

Fiction.

I was like, This is great.

And like talking about like that too.

And like having that perspective  
of like the one

protagonist's father  
was the plantation owner at the time.

I'm like addressing that in a book.

It's like

dancing around it like this is the thing  
that happened also there's zombies,

but like

and mixed exciting with you  
with your fantasy too.

You're not like, Oh,

the only black authors are writing,  
like gritty, hard life stories.

**Melody:**

MM Yeah.

There's a wealth of stories to be told.

And I'm just so happy that publishers are.

I don't want to say seeing that,

because they could have seen  
that all the time if they chose to.

But they're seeing downsides now.

And so

but I'm just so happy

that our stories are finally being told,  
because we've always been here.

We've always been telling our stories.

But to have our stories told a way  
where they can be

more easily accessible through a bookstore  
is just absolutely incredible.

And I'm so happy that we're finally here  
and this is just the beginning.

**Cecilia:**

I think accessibility  
is definitely important and like coming in

to the library and seeing displays  
or seeing the books on the shelves

or being able to access them  
digitally too, with your library card

**Melody:**

Shout out to the libby app

it is my savior

I love getting all of your books  
and ebooks from there.

Oh my goodness. So yeah.

**Chris:**

And the other thing I know it seems like  
it's not just like, oh, one thing, like.

The protagonist.

Is black or the protagonist is LGBT.

Like you're getting like a mix of things.

Like people have layers,  
like they're not one demographic.

Yeah.

Seeing that in books too of like  
you can be more than one thing all at once

and have to deal with it  
and like having that in the not just like,

like focus is on that topic.

It's like, hey, by the way,  
this is like, also we're going to go fight

zombies or whatever else is happening.

It's not like we're just going to be like here one thing or focus on this topic.

It's like there's more going on.

Like seeing that there's more going on like just that.

**Cecilia:**

Yeah, I definitely agree with you said about people not just being one thing.

Everybody's like multifaceted

and that's I feel like a lot of books nowadays are definitely

have teens questioning either their gender or sexuality

within the book even to us it's like in their heads

and I just think that's what real teens do.

So we're showing more of that.

**Chris:**

And that's not like any other like wrapped up in a pretty bow

oh at the end of like I figured out things like I don't know

I'm like I'm a teenager, I don't know anything at this point.

What knows what tomorrow's like?

I was like, I'm like, Yeah, no, you're teenagers.

Like, don't, you don't need to figure out anything at this point.

Like,

you need to know the answers to that test you're taking, everything else you got time

and having like the use of books like be like, oh, I got time is great to show.

Like you can change like you don't have your life figured out at you're

graduating high school, you're like, I'm going to college and I'll probably change

my major twice.

**Melody**

And that's okay.

It's okay. Yeah.

**Cecilia:**

Any final thoughts  
before we wrap things up?

**Melody:**

Uh no final thoughts,

This has been so much fun.

Thank you so much for having me.

I, I really enjoyed this conversation.

It was really fun.

**Cecilia:**

Thanks for being here.

Thanks for joining us today, Melody.

Tell everyone  
where they can find you online.

**Melody:**

I am on melanin underscore YA on twitter

or melanin in y a

on Instagram and then on Twitter.

Just.

Melody Simpson If you're just trying  
to follow me personally and of course

melanininya.com, all the links  
are there for everything else.

Maybe eventually down the line this year  
we will.

We, being me, will start

I have, I have melanin in ya TikTok, but  
I have not put anything on it quite yet.

But hopefully soon that will happen.

But yeah, Instagram and Twitter  
seem to be the main social media

outlets  
that get attention for melanin in YA

So just sticking with that

mainly for now and then of course  
melanininya.com.

Awesome.

**Cecilia:**

And you can find all those links on our  
padlet on our website

be sure to check out the Ocean  
County Library's website for more podcasts

and events on our website.

Calendar of Events page.

All titles mentioned in today's  
episode can be found through the Ocean  
County Library.

Free with your library.  
Until next time, happy reading.