

Episode Fourteen: The Egypt Game by Zilpha Keatley Snyder

Brandon

Welcome to My Dog Ate My Book Report, a podcast where two weirdo thirtysomethings take turns introducing each other to a formative book from childhood the other has never read. I'm Brandon (he/him).

Wren

I'm Wren (they/them).

Brandon

Yeah, and today we're talking about one of my picks, The Egypt Game by Zilpha Keatley Snyder. Wren. I have several things I feel like I need to say I'm trying to figure out what I need to say, in what order.

Wren

I was expecting some sort of like interesting little affectation to your intro or something a la April.

Brandon

Oh, maybe I should have. Would you believe that I am currently wearing fake eyelashes? I'm not but I'm very I'm very good at acting, in a vocal sense, as a person who is wearing fake eyelashes,

Wren

Would you mind if I bet my fake eyelashes auditorily at you?

Brandon

I have a sound effects record to play. So...

Wren

Smoking noises.

Brandon

Yeah. I-

Wren

Nobody's gonna know what we're talking about.

Brandon

I, I did not understand those jokes when I was a child. Man. So good. So, whew. Well, number one, I think that I should preface: you know, we do our book choices essentially in pairs, since we're alternating, so we kind of decide on our next book choice more or less at the same time, usually, and sometimes what one of us is choosing informs what the other person chooses for the for the same slot,

so to speak. It's not a formal thing that we've done, but it is a thing that we've sometimes kind of done, if it seemed to make sense to us.

Wren

I mean, some of those traces, though, have been like, when we find the connections between them, it's a bit of a stretch. It's like, I pick The Mouse and the Motorcycle and you pick a book that a kid happens to be riding a motorcycle in one part.

Brandon

Yeah. Which is an excellent...

Wren

Coincidence!

Brandon

...an excellent rationale. That is not what happened when we picked the two books that we picked at this juncture: Z for Zachariah, which we talked about last time, and The Egypt Game, the one we're talking about today. But we did, I think, accidentally have a theme.

Wren

I'm like narrowing my eyes skeptically in your direction, if you can hear that.

Brandon

Yeah, I can. The theme is that we both picked books that have some pretty dark content in them that we did not remember at all. They're not really on the same level, I suppose, but still, I did...we'll get there. I suppose we should probably content warning, then. I actually didn't think of a lot of things here, aside from...it is a book that maybe hasn't aged great in some ways, because there's a lot of what could be called cultural appropriation in there. There's also a child murderer. And the mention of murder of children. So and that's the part I had no recollection of being anything to do with this book.

Wren

Yeah, there's sort of a running theme of the adults are all worried about this child serial killer.

Brandon

Yeah. And like it plays into the climax of the book. I was just like, I remember kids, and they have this make believe game about Egypt. And it made me want to have a make believe game. And that was great. I did not recall that it ended because a child murderer tried to kill the protagonist.

Wren

Tell us a little bit more about this protagonist.

Brandon

Man, April. I did find a couple of funny things here. I had to type. I've said this a lot. And I didn't realize it at the time. The time being elementary school. In my head, I've always kind of thought of this book in

largely the same category as From the Mixed-up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler. Um, I read this one first by a year or two. I can't remember if I read this in third or fourth grade; Mixed-Up Files was definitely fifth grade. But in my brain, the sort of feeling of positive regard I had for them was very similar. And I kind of felt like it was for similar reasons. Not that anybody in this book goes and runs away to Egypt, or even the Egyptian wing of the museum, but...

Wren

They do sneak away to Egypt.

Brandon

Yeah, there's some clandestine children creating their own little world sort of. Also, both of these books have protagonists who are girls who are just the worst sometimes.

Wren

Okay, okay. Hold on. This is some April slander and I will not have it.

Brandon

Fine. Well, April...April's...fine. So, The Egypt Game is the tale of 11-year-old April, who's the daughter of a presumably, she would have you believe - and I think she honestly believes - up and coming Hollywood actress, but her Hollywood actress mother is on tour or something with her new boyfriend, and so April is sent to live with her grandmother in Berkeley, California. Her grandmother, who she doesn't have a ton of a relationship with, to begin with, even to the point that she calls her grandmother Caroline instead of Grandma, at the beginning. And April is just really ready for when her mother will come back and sweep her back to Hollywood. And until then, she is going to act like she's better than everybody, wear her hair up and like a Hollywood up-do, wear fake eyelashes, talk about Hollywood all the time to all of the children at the school she now attends, and she is only saved from this ill-advised approach to life by one of her new neighbors, and future bestie, Melanie, who pretty quickly intervenes because she realizes that school will eat April alive. April and Melanie discover though that they have a shared love for learning about archaeology, and ancient stuff, and in particular, Egypt. And so their friendship blossoms around checking out all the books about Egypt from the library. Fairly soon, especially after the discovery of a disused yard behind an antique shop that is near the building where they live, this fascination becomes an ongoing imagination game that they call "the Egypt game," where in that yard with a bust of Nefertiti and a lot of other junk they over the time acquire, they have this ongoing story of their version of Egypt, adding to it rituals and history of their own. And also, as time goes on more inhabitants. The the third original Egyptian is Melanie's younger brother Marshall. He's like, four. And, let's see, the fourth original Egyptian is Marshall's stuffed octopus, Security, and then over time, they also recruit Elizabeth, who is a nine-year-old girl who moves into their building a little ways in, and then, later on, a couple of boys from their class (ick!), named Toby and Ken. And so this shared imagination game continues until April almost gets kidnapped by a child murderer. And Egypt is sadly discovered by, you know, people saving her from being kidnapped by a child murderer. The end.

Wren

There's also like, mysterious notes and things.

Brandon

Yeah, I mean, there's I ever since I sort of like just free handed the Animorphs synopsis. I've decided that I need to avoid minutiae at the synopsis stage.

Wren

That is fair.

Brandon

I had an Egypt fixation as a child.

Wren

Who didn't? Who didn't?

Brandon

I mean, I don't know, I feel like I didn't know a lot of other kids who did.

Wren

If you never had an Egypt phase in your childhood, what are you, neurotypical?

Brandon

I guess that might be...yeah. Well, because I have...I have wondered - this is a minor digression, but a thing about me is that I was diagnosed with ADHD a few years ago, as an adult. And it's one of those things that generally they tell you is pretty much always diagnosed in childhood. And part of that diagnosis and learning how to treat it - all of which has been very positive for my headspace in general - was learning that Like, I had the perception of ADHD, especially as a child of like, the kid who's always disruptive in class and like, won't stay in his seat, and like, keeps on interrupting the teacher - like that kid, right? Because those are the people who you always would hear about, like, being medicated for it. I was a very good kid in school, and so some of the things that I now look back on as possible symptoms were things that happened to just work within our expectations for education. For example, I didn't realize that the hyper fixation could be the way that it was, and now, in retrospect, there's a lot of things that I did as a kid that I kind of look at and say, "Was I hyper fixated on this?" And Egypt was one of those things. There was, there was a period of time in my life where I feel like I just...when I wasn't required to be doing something else, I was reading about, thinking about, imagining about Egypt, it was just all that I did. And I felt like that was a normal thing to do as a kid. I mean, why not? Now I kind of wonder if, if that was an early warning sign. And that's why I picked this book up off of the shelf at one point when I found it at my school in third or fourth grade. I remember that our class had a little bookshelf in the corner of assorted novels and stuff. Separate from - I actually don't know where it came from, because it wasn't in the library, it was in the classroom. I assume they belonged to the school. I don't know. I don't know why it was there. But a lot of books that I read at that age I just discovered on that bookshelf. And this is one of the ones that I found and because Egypt was in the title, I was like, yep, this one's for me. And I remember just kind of devouring it and do not remember any of the parts about child murder. I maybe am overplaying that particular fact. It's actually not a huge part of the book. But like, I'm just kind of really shocked I have no recollection of it being part of the plot. It just seems like such a standout thing.

Wren

One of the things that amused me greatly when I finished this book, is the very last couple of pages are like here. Would you like to read these other, like, vaguely similar books? Like From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs Basil E. Frankweiler?

Brandon

Oh, boy.

Wren

Would you like to read Hatchet?

Brandon

Oh, really?

Wren

Would you like to read The Tombs of Atuan?

Brandon

Oh, wow. Has...you're using a physical copy though, right?

Wren

I'm using a physical copy.

Brandon

So how did the algorithm get in your physical copy of the book?

Wren

I don't know!

Brandon

Yeah, so this was...I just, I just remember this one really, kind of captivating me with the idea of this ongoing...you know, they call it a game.

Wren

They're LARPing.

Brandon

I'd maybe call it a fiction. Yeah. Cuz, you know, I played make believe with friends and stuff. But like, it wasn't like...we didn't build a mythology generally. And the idea of doing like the characters in this book do and having this world that is built up out of some, like shared creativity, and kept somewhat consistent over time. And like the fact that the kid stopped sometimes and talk about what facts should be true, or how some ritual ought to work. There's some stuff that I now recognize, as "yes...and."

Wren

See, I loved that. It made me think of when my younger siblings and I got hyper fixated on ancient Rome and like gladiator arenas as a small child. And we went off into the woods behind the house and dug out a gladiator pit and hit each other with sticks, like actual sticks made of wood. Because we were in the gladiator pit, there was a whole whole thing we arranged around this, this world of gladiators that we invented from watching a gladiator documentary. So that seemed very...that just kind of made me think of that and how, how nice it is to just have that freedom as a child to just go outside and let your brain be wild.

Brandon

Yeah, and I definitely remember a couple things that my friends and I would do around this age, and I'm not entirely sure whether it was before or after this book entered my life, so I can't say for sure to what degree some of it might have been inspired by this book. But I imagine some amount of it was. Some amount of the idea of an interconnected like series of play sessions over time.

Wren

Yeah, it makes me wonder...because I know that, at least in my childhood, that sort of thing dropped off probably when I was around like 15, and we finally got access to video games. I kind of wonder if kids do this sort of nonsense now.

Brandon

Yeah, I don't know.

Wren

Like, we play Minecraft together. And that's what we do.

Brandon

Well, in defense of Minecraft. When you play Minecraft with your friends, generally, that's a very shared construction kind of activity, you know?

Wren

I wasn't knocking Minecraft. I've never actually played Minecraft, but I definitely understand that there's, like, a very together make believe.

Brandon

Yeah, yeah, I don't know, I definitely stopped doing this kind of stuff when I moved between fourth and fifth grade. I only moved across town, but it was far enough that it was a different school and that I was too far away from any of my friends to go play with them unless I convinced my parents to drive, you know, half an hour to the other side of town, which of course didn't happen all that often. And that was after, like, my main friends in like, second through fourth grade, lived a few houses up the street from me, so we just went outside and walked to each other's houses after school, and could just hang out like every day pretty much. And I just didn't really make new friends of that sort at the new school. I made my new friends mostly through Animorphs and video games. And so that's kind of when my life definitely became like, socially speaking, when I went over to a friend's house or vice versa, it was

usually for video games. So we can talk a little bit about the...the book tends to call them the Egyptians even though none of them are of Egyptian descent. Though they are multicultural.

Wren

Yeah, I was actually really impressed by that.

Brandon

I have a good note when we get to the talking about the author and stuff that I think kind of makes my heart happy. Sort of, sort of.

Wren

I want to go back to your April slander at the beginning.

Brandon

Yeah, let's talk about April.

Wren

You said April is horrible. And I feel like that is that is just an awful thing to say.

Brandon

April's horrible at the beginning. She does get much better once she actually allows for Melanie to be her friend.

Wren

I don't even think she's horrible.

Brandon

I mean, I-

Wren

Okay, so April has been shunted off to a almost stranger by this woman who clearly has done a terrible job raising her so far. Such that like, she has all of these like Hollywood affectations, and things that she thinks are like, the way to be a human. And she's lonely and sad because her mother keeps like brushing her off and clearly has no intention of ever like having her come live with her again. I think one of the real villains in this story is April's mother.

Brandon

Oh, yeah, absolutely.

Wren

I mean, the child murderer too, but...

Brandon

Mainly April's mom. Yeah. Yeah, like I do like the character of April quite a lot, ultimately, because I think that her reason for being the way she is, is a very understandable.

Wren

And it's not like she's doing it out of malice. It's not like she's putting on fake eyelashes because she, I don't know, has some sort of nefarious intent. She puts them on because she's used to being in Hollywood, where everyone is fake and weird. And so she was doing what she thinks is right.

Brandon

I mean, at the beginning, she is very much kind of, like keeping all of the other kids around. Enter at arm's length on the basis of at least appearing to be like us to higher society than this like podunk little school she's in now. And yeah, that's probably, to a certain degree, a defense mechanism more than genuine arrogance or something, but...

Wren

I think you could read as a defense mechanism and I think you could also read it as, this is just how this girl was taught to act around people in a place like Hollywood. Like act like you're more important and better than everyone, because everyone's trying to be more important than everyone.

Brandon

Yeah. And we and we never do actually meet Dorothea, her mom, and we never do actually go to Hollywood, so we're not super sure of some of the facts of the case versus what April believes, because she's been misled or raised a certain way. But April gets over the Hollywood thing over time. For her, the arc is definitely at first, it's dropping the affectation, and just like actually genuinely engaging with Melanie, and then other kids. And then by the end, it's deciding she doesn't want to go back to Hollywood, or at least go back to be with her mother.

Wren

Well, her mother doesn't explicitly invite her to come back. Her mother invites her for a visit for a few days.

Brandon

Yeah, but if she had gotten that letter at the beginning of the book, she would have immediately gone in hopes that she would then just stay there, right?

Wren

Yeah. And I loved how in the the kind of like, screw you I'm hanging out with my grandma now letter, she calls Grandma Grandma, and she calls her mother Dorthea. So it's like she's reversed that the thing. I'm disrespecting you. Yeah, for those listening, who may not have read this book, in the interim, between when this Dorthea horrible mother drops off her child with her mother, to just, you know, shunt all responsibility, she goes and gets married. Doesn't invite her daughter to the wedding, or her own mother for that matter. She tells April, "I'm going off on tour, so you're going to stay with your grandmother for a little while." Meanwhile, like, she comes back from tour, doesn't say anything for a while, and April just sort of finds out that her mother has been back. It's just awful. Dorothea's terrible.

Brandon

She is. She's definitely the emotional villain here.

Wren

Speaking of villains, I realized that the book, so...I kind of was playing this like, trying to outsmart the author thing. Trying to figure out who the child murderer was. Because I was sitting there like, okay, I think the book wants you to think that maybe it's the old man who owns the antique shop.

Brandon

The Professor.

Wren

The Professor. And I'm like, there's no way it's actually the old man, because that's too obvious. That's just what, you know, the book wants us to maybe be thinking, because we know he's creepily watching them.

Brandon

Yeah, the very beginning of the book is actually from his perspective, and, or, you know, it's not first person, but it's with him as he watches April and Melanie discover the backyard of his shop.

Wren

And so I was like, of course it's not him. But then I go, and my copy of the book has these great illustrations. I don't know if yours did. And the very first page of my copy has the old man in the antique shop just looking like the creepiest creeper. And I'm like, wait a minute. Maybe it is him. Because it's not the first page like in the first chapter. It's the literal first page of this book. Like you open the book, there's that, and then there's, oh, there's the title of this book also by this author, introduction, like so you forget about that picture. Until you accidentally open it with your thumb one day and you're like, Oh, God, that picture's creepy. Maybe it really is him. It establishes him in the beginning, and then he's never mentioned again really. Oh my God, it might be him!

Brandon

Yeah, it establishes him at the beginning. And April does briefly go into his shop early on and has a short exchange with him. Because she sees some stuff that he has that is from Egypt. And he tells her a little about it. And that's kind of what gets the ball rolling on the her going and learning about Egypt and stuff like that. But yeah, then he just kind of vanishes for a while. Except as we come to find out the best part. Marshall knew he was watching the entire time.

Wren

Yeah, I...so about halfway through the book, Marshall says something really cryptic, because they're like, we don't want Egypt to be invaded by any strangers. And Marshall just says, "Oh, it's already been invaded." And then it just doesn't address like, why he said that for a while. And I'm just like, excuse me, Marshall? Come again? What?

Brandon

Marshall's great. He's one of those just like young child characters, he's four years old, it's made a point of that he doesn't really behave that much like a four year old, in particular that he doesn't tend to talk very much or be like an active participant in the game. But when he does talk, it's kind of eloquent and insightful, in a way. And so the other characters often just kind of like don't really put a lot of stock in what Marshall actually says, because they're busy in their fantasy world that they know that he is only kind of intermittently involved in. Marshall is usually there because of Melanie, his older sister, and April's best friend pretty much, once they get going, and is pretty equally engaged in the entire project of the Egypt game. And just has to watch Marshall a lot, and so he comes too.

Wren

I liked the boys. I was worried when their last two additions to the Egypt gang, as they call themselves, are Toby and Ken who invaded basically. They followed them at one point. They followed them on Halloween, piled boxes up in the alley and just watched them over the fence for like an hour it seemed, and then jumped down and scared the crap out of them. And they were like, hey! And then Elizabeth goes and like guilt trips them into not telling. And they just become part of the whole thing, and I think they are a fun inclusion.

Brandon

Yeah, cuz we had met them a couple times earlier. They were mentioned when the school year started as sort of part of just the characters that April meets at school as sort of like the sixth grade ish, I think, equivalent of like the popular kids, or whatever. And then they encountered them a little earlier on Halloween night, and there's just this antagonism between them and April and Melanie, which a lot boils down to kind of they're not...none of them are quite the age where you are yet permitted to mingle with children of the opposite sex, because they're all gross. But Toby is super here for it. Toby dives in with like, a lot of ideas of how to expand the game, and new things to do with the game. Ken is just sort of also there. And you mentioned Elizabeth, she is also also there.

Wren

Yeah, I think she's kind of given the least to do or be. I don't think there's there's ever a chapter that's like from her perspective. She and Ken don't get chapters from their perspective.

Brandon

Yeah. Elizabeth is notable for being the first person who gets to join the game.

Wren

That's true.

Brandon

Because April and Melanie and Marshall were doing it for a while, and then Elizabeth's family moved in. And Elizabeth is nine, and they didn't really want to have to deal with Elizabeth because like when you're eleven, as the book notes, it feels like there's a big age gap between eleven and nine.

Wren

So they went and assessed.

Brandon

Yeah. And so she's relevant for the time that they're like meeting her and kind of introducing her to the game, and that is the first time that anyone else is brought in from the outside. She's generally characterized as being relatively quiet and cooperative, but diplomatic and so she does sort of fade into the background, especially once the boys join.

Wren

Her bird dies.

Brandon

Her bird does die. And they do...things with it.

Wren

They do an elaborate funeral for a bird with attempted mummification. As somebody who owns a pet bird, it was a little gruesome to think about. But I'm glad that they decided that it was too gross to try to actually mummify. In terms of like, you know, pulling out organs and things. I think I would have been really grossed out by.

Brandon

Yeah, ultimately, their adherence to any of the things that they learn in the books that they get about Egypt is overall, like, for convenience. They generally invent their own like rituals and stuff, often based loosely upon some fact they know, but then they just sort of take it and run with it to do their own thing.

Wren

So the book can kind of be split up into a couple of like, micro conflicts, which I think are of sort of an interesting escalation. The first thing that's really like a problem is Melanie tries to find a way to steal April's fake eyelashes, so that she doesn't go to school with them and, as you said earlier, get eaten alive by the other kids. And so she does steal the fake eyelashes, hides them, and then puts them back once April had sort of forgotten about them. Which I thought was hilarious. I really liked Melanie as a character at that point.

Brandon

Yeah. Melanie's...Melanie's great.

Brandon

Yes, Thoth.

Wren

I'm stealing your object, I'm stealing your possessions, but I'm doing it for your own good, buddy. And then...then it sort of jumps to - and all of this is happening while they're developing the Egypt game - and then a child gets murdered. And so the conflict is like, how do we get our parents to let us out of the house to go back and play the Egypt game? So they, you know, concoct this whole big plan to

sneak out during Halloween and stuff, and that all works out. And then they start writing messages to...Thoth?

Wren

And getting responses, which was kind of like a cool creepy mystery for a little while.

Brandon

Yeah, Toby comes up with the idea of consulting an oracle. Or maybe...maybe he isn't the one who came up with the idea. He was the one who like does the ritual part as far as writing a question on a piece of paper and sticking it in Thoth's beak. Thoth, here, actual Egyptian deity but like, here played by a stuffed owl.

Wren

And we don't mean plush. We mean taxidermied owl.

Brandon

Thoth not actually normally an owl, but they probably didn't have a taxidermied ibis, so...we'll let it go.

Wren

So then we get our first like from the perspective of Toby chapter, where Toby's having a guilt trip because the first two times that there was a message that was mysteriously answered by seemingly none of them, it was actually him having snuck back to the alley and wrote an answer in. But the third time, it wasn't.

Brandon

Yeah, because the third question...the first two questions were kind of larger future sort of questions, and Toby consulted a book of like great quotes, and just picked one that sounded suitable, so it kind of was an answer that didn't exactly answer the question, but sounded mysterious and like you could interpret it a certain way. But the third question came when Marshall misplaced Security, his octopus, who he is never without, and they couldn't find Security anywhere, and Marshall was like, "We should ask the Oracle." And so they do. And of course, Toby doesn't know where Security is. And like, nobody wants to be the one that like writes an answer to that question about where Security is and be wrong or like, tell Marshall that something has happened to his octopus. But lo and behold, when they check the paper, it says to check under the altar of Set. Because they they've set up a couple little temples basically with Set being sort of their antagonist for the Egypt game, and so he has an altar with a rock that they decided was kind of ominously shaped on top of an egg crate, and sure enough when they look under it, there's Security, but they don't know who wrote the answer.

Wren

Yeah, so there's that mystery. And then, suddenly April almost gets child murdered.

Brandon

Yeah. It really is sort of a very swift climax, because it's a night where Melanie and Melanie's parents are at a concert. April is babysitting Marshall.

Wren

Excuse me. Visiting Marshall.

Brandon

You're right, visiting Marshall.

Wren

Marshall does not like to be babysat, but he accepts there being a babysitter if the parents frame it as this person is coming to visit you.

Brandon

Yeah. April is visiting Marshall while Marshall's parents and older sister are at a concert. And they go to Egypt late. Was it to get a book?

Wren

Yeah, she realized she left her math book there, and she couldn't do her homework. And she was sort of at this point was actually starting to do pretty well in school and accept her position in, you know, life where she was, you know, with her grandmother, and she realized that she was going to get terrible grade if she didn't go get the book.

Brandon

Yeah. And so they go to Egypt to get the book and it's after dark. It's, you know, not not a time they would normally be going to Egypt at all and didn't warrant telling any of the others, because she expected just be in and out pretty quick. But when she went into the yard and found her book, she then got grabbed from behind. And it seemed like she was going to get kidnapped. And we were left to assume at that moment, and this this ends up being true, that this is the child murderer.

Wren

He starts strangling her.

Brandon

And she is rescued by the Professor, who has been watching, like breaking open his window and crying for help. And that's how we learn ultimately that the Professor was watching them the entire time because I believe the police asked Marshall what he saw, and Marshall identifies the Professor as the guy that is always watching through the window. As being like the guy who's saved April not the guy who was trying to kidnap April or kill April. And so like necessarily, at that point, they feel a little bit like Egypt maybe is over, which I guess is understandable. The child murderer is apprehended. Turns out he was a stock boy at the local store who I think briefly appeared earlier in the book. It's...though this book has mysterious elements, the plot is not about the Egyptians cracking a child murder case. There's no clues or anything to be had there, I don't think. It's never anything that they concern themselves with any more than just when it causes them inconvenience as far as their parents not letting them out. It's just sort of what amounts to the climax of the book and the thing that kind of reveals that other people know about Egypt and also give some kind of traumatic experience at that

particular location that maybe people don't want to repeat. And also is, is a big, emotional moment for April to kind of, I think, reassess her relationships with all the people involved and like realize that she's built this life here, where she is very attached to her grandmother now, and she does have all of these really great friends, and she doesn't necessarily miss Hollywood anymore.

Wren

Yeah, the thing that I found very interesting is, when that's all happening in the police station and stuff, I'm like, okay, this is how she's gonna go home. The mother is going to find out that she almost got child murdered. But then it turns out later that she asked her grandmother to not tell the mother about anything that happened. Presumably, because I think April might have realized that maybe that would happen. And she didn't want to go.

Brandon

Yeah, we're never directly told that, but April turning down the chance to visit is kind of the clearest statement we get that April no longer really, once to go back to Hollywood with her mother. This thing that she spent a lot of the early part of the book, not just wanting, but expecting was a foregone conclusion that just any day her mother would show up to take her back. She now no longer even wants that.

Brandon

There's definitely elements that as I was reading, I was like, some of this is probably a little problematic now, especially when they're assigning all of this like, new context to Egyptian deities and stuff. Like Set being the evil god, which is not really accurate to the mythology. But, as appropriation goes...you know, I was expecting a lot worse, frankly, from just not having read this book in years, and I was kind of just expecting to come into it and it just be kind of like a lot of, like, clumsy appropriation or something.

Wren

Yeah, I felt like it was fairly tame, honestly. It was kids kind of simplifying Egyptology for their own purposes.

Brandon

They used real history and stuff that they learned as a springboard for an imagination game that wasn't necessarily about trying to recreate Egypt, like in any way that they thought was accurate, necessarily. I think they clearly didn't think that they were acting just like real Ancient Egyptians, right. But it was just sort of the beginning for this shared world they built. But the stuff that they brought to it was always the stuff that ultimately was more important.

Wren

I'm not sure how that statement of, "You know, she didn't do so so terrible with the appropriation!" holds up when it comes to the sequel.

Brandon

Yeah, I just...I just...the sequel exists, and I don't want to know about it anymore. Yeah, so we can get into some background, I guess. So let's talk a little bit about the background of this book. Zilpha Keatley Snyder was a teacher and author of, I think, forty-six...

Wren

Holy moly!

Brandon

...books, ultimately.

Wren

She's gonna give Stephen King a run for his money.

Brandon

Well, she's...she's passed the last turn of the game.

Wren

Oh, yeah, that makes sense.

Brandon

She was born in 1927; taught school in numerous states, because her husband, at least for some of the time, had a military career that was moving around; did teach for about a decade in Berkeley, which I think is around the time that she wrote *The Egypt Game*; it was not her first book, though it is probably her most famous. The characters, certainly in this book, but I think I got the vibe in other books too, were in various ways based upon children she had taught. This book was also partially springing from just what she said in her foreword was a fascination with Egypt that she had had, so it was kind of this combination of some personal experience and like, this particular era that interested her when she was younger, and...she talks about it kind of, and she talks about the multicultural nature of the cast, in a way that I...I...I, mmm...I find mostly okay. I kind of got the vibe from the foreword and from some of the things that I looked up, that she's maybe...she's maybe one of those people who was well-intentioned, but didn't entirely realize that occasionally she was dipping into maybe some exoticism.

Wren

I will say there were there were two, two thoughts I had on that while I was reading. The first was in descriptions of Elizabeth.

Brandon

Yeah, for sure.

Wren

In particular, when she is able to sort of like demurely sweet talk the boys into not ratting them out. I felt like there was a little bit of like uncomfortable description of, of how Elizabeth was able to sort of like, I don't know...it just made me feel a little weird, the way that she described it. Specifically, I should state

that Elizabeth was a an Asian character. So like describing her as like tiny interviewers sort of a little bit of a stereotype.

Brandon

Yeah, and she mentioned the shape of her eyes a couple of times, in a way that I felt that was like maybe a little bit fixated. Now, to be sure, we've talked about numerous books on this podcast by now that either had like, really bad racial stereotypes in them, or only didn't have those things because somebody edited the book before we got to it.

Wren

That's true.

Brandon

And that is not the case with this book. I think that Snyder was genuinely invested, from what I've read, in like celebrating the diversity of the kids that she had taught, because the Egyptians, all told...April is some unspecified white, Melanie and Marshall are both black, Elizabeth and Ken are both Asian of some persuasion...

Wren

I think Ken was Japanese, and I think that it was not made clear where Elizabeth's family was from. Ken was Japanese and Toby was nebulously Hispanic. His last name was like Aguilar?

Brandon

I don't think any of the characters, any of the children at least, were meant to be like immigrants. They all seem to be American kids of these of this descent. But ultimately, for the most part, the race of the characters is not something that is integral to the plot, but it is there and is a thing that Snyder did on purpose, because this was drawing from experience she had had with teaching classes of children in places that are very diverse in terms of racial and cultural origin. And I think that she had the best of intentions in the way that she was depicting that stuff, even if some of it in some cases feels a little bit uncomfortable to us now.

Wren

Yeah, once I was done being relieved that there wasn't any, like, outright...I mean, I guess it's hard to say whether or not there was any tokenizing, because it's kind of a, you know, she got one of many different types of folks. It was an impressive mix of backgrounds, and I wasn't expecting that in a book from this era.

Brandon

Well, and here's, here's the thing that actually made me feel way better about it. But also disappointed. Disney wanted to option this book. Snyder would not sell it to them, because they would not guarantee her a multiracial cast.

Wren

Oh, my gosh. Yeah, fuck you, mouse!

Brandon

Or at least that is what Snyder's longtime editor claims was the case.

Wren

That's great.

Brandon

Yeah. When I was starting to research for this, I thought, wow, I'm a little surprised that I don't think there's any adaptations that I know of. And that's apparently why, or at least why Disney didn't adapt it. I didn't find any evidence of any other adaptation. I guess it might just be like, very hidden somewhere. But yeah, that apparently, is a thing that occurred.

Wren

That's great. I like that a lot.

Brandon

So all that to say, we're two white folks talking about this book that does have a lot of things in it. And, you know, I've seen a lot worse. I can't necessarily say for sure that if you are a person of, for instance, Egyptian descent, that it wouldn't make you uncomfortable the way that ancient Egyptian culture is utilized here, but I've definitely seen a lot worse.

Wren

That's true. I suppose. There could be something to say for the fact that well, yes, she got Asian characters and black characters and etc. But there's no middle eastern characters.

Brandon

Would you be surprised to know this book is challenged in schools with some regularity?

Wren

See, I'm not surprised because...

Brandon

You want to guess why?

Wren

Okay, hold on. I'm gonna make a guess. I'm gonna guess it the real reason is the multiculturalism, but that's not the reason they say. The reason they say is because it depicts a absentee mother.

Brandon

Hmm. I did not find any evidence that that was a reason that it was challenged.

Wren

Well, like in Hatchet that was challenged a lot because of the mother being depicted as, as bad for cheating on the father.

Brandon

Interesting. The primary reason that this book is challenged, is for its depiction of...rituals.

Wren

Oh, for fuck's sake.

Brandon

Which of course, I think we need to understand that there's the implicit non-Christian rituals in that challenge.

Wren

I need to write in our show notes that this is an episode I'm gonna have to flag as explicit because I know that I've sworn several times. That's some bullshit.

Brandon

It seems like it's not challenged as often as some other things we talked about, certainly. I did find some evidence that there is at least like a measure of chatter about how suitable it was for children of the age it's presumably for because of the child murder part. But from what I found, it seemed like when it's challenged as far as being available in schools, it's got more to do with the ritualistic stuff. You mentioned the illustrations; the illustrations for the book were by Alton Raible (RAY-ble or REYE-ble). R-A-I-B-L-E, I'm not entirely sure how it's pronounced, who was an art teacher in California, and department chair at a college of some kind that I didn't write down the name of. He illustrated many of Snyder's books, as well as doing illustrations for other children's books and other art things. His work, aside from being in children's books, which is probably what he's best known for...he's also had paintings exhibited at various places, including the Smithsonian Institution, so a person of some repute. And I like them a lot.

Wren

Yeah, I like the illustrations.

Brandon

They have a very particular style that I think is a little bit hard to put my finger on how to describe it...but I think to your point earlier, there is a certain eeriness maybe.

Wren

Yeah.

Brandon

As I said earlier, Snyder wrote 46 books. Most, if not all, of them were children's books, by the time of her death in 2014.

Wren

And we can't say the title of sequel to this because it contains a slur.

Brandon

Yeah, the sequel to this came out...this book was in 1968. The sequel didn't come out until 1997. Follows from the last line of this book. And it's the same the same format of title but with Egypt replaced with a slur for the Romani people. So yeah. Not super wild that it was published in the late '90s without a problem, but, you know, that doesn't mean we shouldn't be a little critical of the decision now. Maybe someday they will give it a different title and republish it or something.

Brandon

Have you read it?

Brandon

I have not. I did not know it existed until I Googled this book to do for the podcast. I would have read this book a few years prior to that. So it wouldn't have existed when I read this book, and it just never occurred to me that there would have been a sequel, and I just never looked. This book was a Newbery Honor recipient. It did not win, because it was the same year as *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler*. And I did not realize they were literally in the same year, two books that I read at close to the same age and loved for many of the same reasons. They were literally in the same year, and only one of them could be the Newbery Medal winner. The last note that I have is that I did think it was interesting...I found a an article from the *American Journal of Play*, from an issue in 2018, where a games scholar named Cathlena Martin suggested that *The Egypt Game* and some other similar children's books that depict this sort of ongoing imaginative play ought to be also considered in talking about the history of role playing games. This book did predate D&D by a little bit. The assertion is not that like *The Egypt Game* was a direct influence on *Dungeons and Dragons*, or anything, because there's no evidence that that's the case even though you know, who knows? Gygax had kids. But that the oftentimes discussion of roleplaying games and the development of roleplaying games as a form cite literary origins with like Tolkien and stuff, the stuff that is medieval fantasy, but not necessarily about how the game is played, just like what the game is about, right? Whereas some books for children, with *The Egypt Game* being a very good example, do depict this like more formalized play pattern of a shared, created narrative - not because they invented that, but because kids do do that.

Brandon

I'm trying to think of if I would have liked this book when I was your your age. (When I was your age? Would I have liked this book two years ago?) No, the age you were when you read this. And I think I might have? It's hard to say. I think I would have been drawn to the fact that they set this whole thing up in this abandoned, sort of secluded lot that they have to crawl through a hole to get in. I think that would have struck me as like very *Secret Garden*-y, which I think I would have liked.

Brandon

Yeah. And the fact that they like, keep Egypt a secret.

Wren

Yeah, I think I would have liked that aspect of things. I didn't really go for mysteries too much as a kid, but I think that the mystery of who wrote the notes sort of pops up as being a mystery so much later into the book, that I think I might have just been sucked in by then.

Brandon

Yeah, I...I contemplated for myself whether I would call this a mystery from a genre perspective. It has mysterious elements, but like, there's no overarching mystery plot. And even the mystery of who wrote the answer about where Security is...that mystery is introduced and resolved within a chapter or two. I'm not sure what genre I would put this book in. If somebody told me it was a mystery, and I read it, I would probably be a little bit like, I didn't expect this, though it does have mysterious elements. I mean, it's, I guess it's sort of drama, like a children's drama. Because there is a lot of character stuff going on, like all of the characters, and particularly April, the way that they're coping with like, difficulties in their lives through the Egypt game is pretty constantly a part of the book, you know. So, yeah, it's tricky. It's tricky to categorize, I think. What, uh, how many preachers you think you want to give this particular book?

Wren

Oh, I don't know. I...I liked it, but it was kind of like a, like a benign like. I feel like the thing that this book might be lacking for me is a little bit of humor. There just wasn't a lot. Was there anything in this book that like made me laugh? I feel like as a result, our discussion for this book has been very, like calm, and not a lot of banter between us. There's just not a lot of not a lot of humor to be had in any of this.

Brandon

Yeah, there's some there's some funny moments, but they're very minor. And often just kind of a result of Marshall saying something just sort of like incisively precocious.

Wren

Yeah, but nothing so precocious as, "My mother says I'm an angel," or whatever it was.

Brandon

"My mother says I came from heaven."

Wren

Yeah, that's what it was.

Brandon

Yeah. Like I said, I associate Mixed-Up Files and this book closely in my head for a number of reasons, and definitely upon rereading them, I do still find Mixed-Up Files to be just super magical. And a lot of that is I think down to the fact that Koenigsberg is a really funny writer. I think that she's just got a really great dry wit in her writing. And Snyder is just a little more straightforward.

Wren

Yeah, so it was just it was just like a nice pleasant book and I'm very happy for the old man shopkeeper who sort of like ultimately gets back his lust for life from watching these kids playing make believe. I

don't think we talked about that at all. That was the resolution. The shopkeeper was a sad, depressed, but kindly old man.

Brandon

Anyway, I'm gonna say like, I think I give this one like a three peaches.

Wren

I was gonna go 3.5.

Brandon

I enjoyed reading it. It was nice. There were parts that I really liked. There were parts that I did wish there was a little more urgency or drive or something, and I think some of that is down to like, as you said, the writing doesn't have as much humor or something in it as some things do to kind of keep those parts where there's not a lot going on to be like an entertaining read. I definitely understand why it really drew me in as a kid. It just doesn't do that as much for me as an adult. So yeah, that's our that's our episode about The Egypt Game.

Wren

Well, thank you for introducing me.

Brandon

Oh, you're quite welcome. I'm just glad that it wasn't like a really uncomfortable read. I was very concerned that this was going to just be an excruciating glimpse at "white lady writes about Middle Eastern culture."

Wren

Yeah, yeah. It was definitely refreshing after Z for Zachariah. Well, so next episode is one of our fated increment of fives, so I have enlisted a friend to come introduce us to a book that she has read that neither of us have. So stay tuned.

Brandon

Are we keeping it a secret?

Wren

I don't know!

Brandon

The book in question is Roll of Thunder Hear My Cry by Mildred D. Taylor. A book that is not so light and pleasant, but very good, I think.

Wren

Shhh! We're not supposed to give away the secret that we actually recorded that episode before this one.

Brandon

Oh, yeah. You're right. You're right. We need to keep that secret.

Wren

You're ruining how the sausage is made. or...something...Hamilton quote.

Brandon

A book that is I guess about weather. I assume a meteorologist.

Wren

The jig is up. It's fine. We've already read it. We recorded that last week. Just because you know, with a guest, you've got to schedule things differently.

Brandon

It's a good discussion. You should come back for it. But it is a heavy discussion.

Wren

It is.

Brandon

My dog Ate My Book Report is hosted and produced by Wren and Brandon and edited by Derrick Valen and Daisy McNamara.

Wren

The music used in this podcast was licensed by Epidemic Sound. Transcripts were generated by Otter.ai, then heavily edited by us because the AI doesn't understand what we're saying half the time. And our icon image was illustrated by Cindy Lau.

Brandon

To be fair to the AI, I didn't expect it to get "Hork-Bajir" correct. Have a question or comment for the team?

Wren

You can find us on our website, which links to all of our socials at dogatemybookreport (dot) blubrry (dot) net. Blueberry does not have any ees. Or by emailing at dogatemybookreport (at) gmail.com

Brandon

We'd be super excited to know what books you loved growing up.

Wren

Thank you very much for listening.