

Women at Warp Episode 124: Book Club: Dwellers in the Crucible

Andi: Hi everyone. Quick content warning for this episode, we will be discussing torture and sexual assault. So, if that's something you're sensitive to, maybe build yourself up for it or possibly skip this one. Thanks so much.

[Women at Warp theme]

Grace: Hi and welcome to Women at Warp: A Roddenberry *Star Trek* Podcast. Join us as our crew of four-women *Star Trek* fans boldly go on our biweekly mission to explore our favorite franchise. My name is Grace and thanks for tuning in. With us this week, we have Jarrah.

Jarrah: Just over here, dwelling.

Grace: Are you in a Crucible, Jarrah?

Jarrah: Yeah, I may be in a little bit of a Crucible.

Grace: Oh, geez. How'd you get there?

Jarrah: I took a ride at Vulcan.

Grace: Oh, Lord, that was the problem. You made a wrong turn at Albuquerque. [Jarrah laughs] So, we've got a small crew with us this week. Now, before we get to our main topic, we have a little bit of housekeeping to do first. Our show is entirely supported by patrons on Patreon. If you'd like to become a patron, you can do so for as little as a dollar a month. That's all it takes. Just pennies, pennies a month and you get the most amazing rewards. You get thanks on social media. You get our eternal love and friendship. You get these amazing watch-along commentaries that we record all by ourselves with our mouths. And all these opportunities and more await you, you specifically. All you have to do is visit www.patreon.com/womenatwarp. That's all. That's all you've got to do. That's what gets you started on your journey.

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Jarrah: [laughs] Tell them it is a good podcast and a pretty podcast.

Grace: And the one that we are on so, you know it's good.

Jarrah: [laughs] Amazing.

Grace: Is there anything else we want to cover before we dive into the dwelling in the Crucible?

Jarrah: No, I don't think so. We're doing a book club episode today. *Dwellers in the Crucible* by Margaret Wander Bonanno. And just a thanks to the folks who suggested this, Ruth, Mike, Bill and Aaron. And yeah, we're going to talk about it. It's going to be great.

Grace: We're going to talk about a book we read. It's like you're just hanging out with us talking about-- We just talk about books we've read most of the time if we're ever together in meatspace. Don't we?

Jarrah: Definitely. Yeah, and if you want to join the discussion on this book or future reads, you can go to Goodreads and enter Women at Warp in the search bar and then filter by groups and you'll find our book club.

Grace: Find our book club and our many, many, many opinions. All right.

Jarrah: Yes, and we definitely have some opinions on this book.

Grace: Oh, do we ever. Let's talk about the plot of the book to start with. The plot is about two women, original characters, a human and a Vulcan who are captured by a Romulan task force led by one of our personal favorites, the female Romulan commander, who they still haven't gotten around to naming, I guess. And a deep bond develops between these two OCs in the course of their ordeal. And oh, my gosh, is it ever so gay, ever so gay.

Jarrah: [laughs] That's actually the description given to us by Erin, who's in our group. And although she did end it with, "It is hella femslashy."

Grace: Ever so queer. [laughs]

Jarrah: Yes. And wow. Okay, so it is. So, the women, original characters, there's the human, Cleante.

Grace: Cleante.

Jarrah: Cleante Al-Faisal, and the Vulcan, T'Shael, and yeah, they're kidnapped.

Grace: They're kidnapped and held captive with a group of other people. Do we want to go into the concept of why they're kidnapped in the first place?

Jarrah: I think that's pretty important.

Grace: Okay, so the concept is that these figures are all kidnapped together because they all serve the purpose of Warrantors of Peace. The Warrantors of Peace are all these figures who are in some way related or connected to an important political figure on Vulcan. And the idea is that they all have a special capsule embedded in their heart so that if Vulcan declares nuclear war or tries to violate an aggression pact, one of them has to be killed in order to break that, or all of them have to be killed in order for the nukes to be launched.

Jarrah: But there's like, one for every member of the Federation. Cleante is the daughter of the Federation, like the President of Earth, whose name is Jasmine Al-Faisal, who I would like to talk about later.

Grace: Oh, there's a lot to be said. [chuckles]

Jarrah: Yeah. And then there's like, Andorian, and there's, for some reason, several Deltans. I'm not sure why the Deltans. Is it because, like, they need each other for connection that they had so many of them?

Grace: I mean, possibly. It's not very clear.

Jarrah: Yeah.

Grace: Or maybe there's just a really high Deltan population because they go at it like rabbits.

Jarrah: Yeah, that could be. So, they're kidnapped with Andorian and three Deltans. But there's more people in the compound with them on Vulcan. And according to Wikipedia, the concept of Warrantors of the Peace appears to be an implementation of a proposal in 1981 by a guy named Roger Fisher, who proposed that the officer who accompanies the President of the United States with the nuclear launch codes have those codes implanted in his heart to be cut out by the President's hand in the event of war. So, basically the idea is that if the President wanted to fire nuclear weapons, he would have to kill a human being with his own hands, and that therefore it probably would not happen.

And so, that seems to be the idea in this-- That sort of prompted this book maybe also combined with just how people say, "Well, if you had to send your own kids to war, you would never send people to war." Like, you wouldn't send-- our sons to war, but your own sons are like, safe at home sort of rebuke to politicians, particularly during the Vietnam era. What did you think about this, Grace?

Grace: I thought it was a really interesting concept, and I really do like a good high-concept sci-fi story concept which is just, at the risk of sounding repetitive, so conceptual. And it's a simple idea but I liked seeing what they were going to do with it as a story. And honestly, I would have liked to see it in a broader scope beyond with just these two characters. But that said, I didn't dislike it. I thought it was a cool idea in terms of-- It does really sound like someone's weird preventative measure that would be put into place by some really obscure government law or something. It's so very Old Testament-y.

Jarrah: Mm-hmm. Well, I didn't buy it as a Federation thing. [Grace laughs] And our group members on Goodreads were similarly to us, like, a little bit split on the idea about whether they could buy this as something that the Federation would do. Mark said that he noted he hasn't read the book, but the idea sounds more like a Terran Empire than a Federation idea.

Grace: Oh, totally.

Jarrah: And this book was written in 1985, so it's exactly as old as me. But he points out that *The Search for Spock* had already happened, *The Omega Glory* had already happened. And that really points to the idea that the Federation has a representative democracy, which seems very inconsistent with the idea of having political prisoners which are essentially innocent people that could actually be killed in the event of a decision that they had no part in.

Grace: In looking it up, I just want to point out that *Escape from New York* came out four years earlier.

Jarrah: Whoa.

Grace: There's a capsule embedded in you. And if you don't save the President within 24 hours, it'll explode.

Jarrah: Okay, well, maybe the author was also taking some of that into consideration. And we will know hopefully by the time this episode comes out, because Margaret Wander Bonanno has very graciously agreed to do some interview questions with us, which we will be posting in a supplementary blog post on our website, including more about her inspiration for this idea.

Grace: I'm mostly kidding, Margaret. Don't worry. This plot is like reverse *Escape from New York* if anything

Jarrah: Zoe in our group said something though that I did really like, where she said, "I was initially a bit surprised that the Federation as a whole would use something like their Warrantors. However, I was not surprised that the Vulcans would have come up with a system like this. It is weirdly violent for a supposedly peaceable people in many of the same ways that Pon Farr is." So, yeah, that was actually a super good point that this might seem like something that for me felt a little bit inconsistent with Federation ideals but totally makes sense that the Vulcans would do something weird like that, and maybe that's just how it became part of the system.

Grace: It was one of those, oh, well, it's a system we've got and we don't really use it very often, but it's there and no one wants to rewrite the paperwork. etc., etc.

Jarrah: Yeah, and we all know that the Vulcans always win in a staring contest.

Grace: Oh, totally. That's like their thing.

Jarrah: They'd just stare down their noses at everyone until they were like, "Okay, fine, we'll have these Warrantors of Peace I guess."

Grace: I guess the fact that we are talking about like in their culture, something that's very much like, "Oh no, we're all peaceful and calm and what have you," but we do have these secretly really, really sexual and violent ritualistic pasts." This would be a thing that it feels like would be part of that.

Jarrah: Well, I mean that is a good segue because we have to talk about violence and also sex at some point.

Grace: Oh, boy. Yay.

Jarrah: Yeah. Let's maybe start out by talking about the relationship between Cleante and T'Shael.

Grace: Let's do it.

Jarrah: Which is a really big reason that this book was recommended to us, because it's got these really, really strong focus on these characters.

Grace: Basically, these two characters are the central focus of the book, which is great, because then we have Captain Kirk and everyone, and they're basically the B plot in the story of these two ladies with a deep, deep emotional bond.

Jarrah: They do talk about each other, especially near the end of the book, as T'hy'la, which is how you pronounce it, according to Gene Roddenberry, apparently. And T'hy'la, it's a term that any Kirk's box shippers out there will probably know well.

Grace: Well, oh, yeah, this is old hat to them.

Jarrah: It's apocryphal. So, it's not been in canon, as far as I know, but it was coined by Gene Roddenberry in an infamous footnote in his novelization of *Star Trek: The Motion Picture*, which stated that Spock thinks of Kirk as his T'hy'la, a Vulcan word that can mean friend, brother, or lover.

Grace: Mmmm.

Jarrah: Mm-hmm.

Grace: Mmmm.

Jarrah: Did you want to read that comment from Mike?

Grace: Absolutely. Mike says, "Would it be too simple to say this was a mirror of the Kirk-Spock relationship or perhaps that just what a reader, probably male, would take from the novel? The two women are strong and independent characters, put into an almost impossible situation, but react in a similar manner with compassion for all and the integrity to do something/anything, to ease another's suffering. It is easy to read into their relationship, a strong emotional bond, and certainly no stretch to envision a physical bond. But ultimately, they are two *Star Trek* characters who reflect the best of what we want to think the Federation represents."

Which is definitely fair to say, I think by the end of the book, they are really, really pushing the Kirk and Spock mirror imagery on us. If I can point out the cover of the book, which is our two-scantily clad female leads on the ground together with giant Kirk and Spock heads behind them, really feels like that's what they're driving home there.

Jarrah: Oh, for sure.

Grace: Also, if we can point out with this Boris Vallejo cover-- if you're listening, please look it up. Boris Vallejo, very excellent painter, but I do have some questions about his depictions of our two female leads. Specifically, why is one of them Sean Young, and which one is the Vulcan and which one is the human?

Jarrah: Yeah, I'm very not clear on that part.

Grace: Yeah, both of them conveniently have their ears covered, and one kind of has sharp eyebrows, but the other has super feathered ass hair. It raises a lot of questions for me.

Jarrah: Also, are Cleante's eyes sufficiently Byzantine?

Grace: What the fuck does Byzantine eyes mean? [Jarrah laughs] They say it a million times in this book, and I've never heard that term before. And after reading this book, I don't think I ever want to hear it again. [laughs]

Jarrah: No, I have to say that there's a lot I really enjoyed about this book, but there needs to be a law against using the word "Byzantine eyes." I think probably at all, but I would maybe concede, like, you could maybe use it once a book, but definitely not more than once a page.

Grace: Also, Cleante is supposed to be Middle Eastern and both of these ladies are pretty damn white looking.

Jarrah: Yes.

Grace: Boris, what the hell?

Jarrah: But my understanding is Byzantine just sort of means like Middle Eastern exotic in this context, which is a little bit problematic but more just that really, it would be nice to just have a bit more variety of the descriptors.

Grace: Margaret, do you have a thesaurus?

Jarrah: There was a little bit of that also calling T'Shael the introverted one many, many times.

Grace: Lots of descriptions of their eye colors when referring to them. Nothing that none of us who has ever written hasn't been guilty of before. But after a while, I kind of wanted to start keeping a tally.

Jarrah: Yeah, that was definitely where-- those were my biggest things that jumped out for me on the side of could do better.

Grace: But yes, there is definitely a mirroring of the two main characters' relationship and Kirk and Spock's relationship, especially near the end when Kirk and Spock are talking to them respectively and like, "Oh, it's so hard to have a deep emotional connection with a Vulcan in your life, isn't it? Ah, boy, do I know that feeling."

Jarrah: [chuckles] Yeah. And actually, side note for people who are maybe trying this book or this author for the first time is that Margaret Wander Bonanno wrote a sequel to this--

Grace: You're kidding.

Jarrah: -about these characters, but it was rejected-

Grace: What? Whaat?

Jarrah: -because of after this book was published a couple years later, the licensing for the licensed novels really started cracking down on this kind of more creative interpretation of the *Star Trek* world, *Star Trek* universe.

Grace: Way to rain on the parade, guys.

Jarrah: Yeah, it was eventually released as the novel, *Probe*, and it was like totally rewritten to be about Kirk and Spock, but with much less sexy times.

Grace: Oh, do Kirk and Spock get trapped in a compound together and watch each other shower and junk because [smacks lips]?

Jarrah: I have not read it, but it has been highly recommended to me. But I'm interested to see what Bonanno has to say. We did ask her a question about that as well in our Interview because I understand that she wasn't really a fan of the final product.

Grace: Well, I can imagine so, no one likes over editing.

Jarrah: It's interesting. Certainly, Mike, our listener, was not the only one to think of a Kirk-Spock parallel. I saw it in several reviews on different websites. But it's interesting because one of the things that I noted and I guess, appreciated about it was that it was very unabashed in discussion of Cleante's sexual history.

Grace: Yeah. Yeah, definitely.

Jarrah: Yeah. And that she wasn't really judged for basically, Kirk-like possibly sleeping around. So, maybe that's a bonus of gender bending Kirk and Spock.

Grace: There is definitely that, the fact that she does talk openly about the fact that she has a promiscuous sex life and has no real issue with that, and she's not slut shamed for it or anything like that, except with some issues with her mom talking about it. This is going to

sound weird, but with that, I was wondering, because we have the Deltans in the picture for the story, if they weren't supposed to be kind of the contrast for that, because they're always talking about how they're so sexual. They're just always having fun, sexy times, and they were captured because they were going at it in a park and, oh, my gosh, they have so much sex, you guys.

And part of me was kind of like, "Well, hang on, are we putting sort of the conversational sexual promiscuity shaming onto them as a way of just switching it from whether we would be giving it to Cleante or not, just kind of having a sexual scapegoat?"

Jarrah: Oh, that's really interesting. I hadn't thought of it that way.

Grace: I was thinking about it.

Jarrah: Possibly, yeah.

Grace: Also, the fact that one of The Deltan is 11, that just kind of grinds it to a halt. Like, "Wait, what?"

Jarrah: Yeah. [Grace laughs] The other thing is, spoilers, they all die.

Grace: They all die.

Jarrah: And I did feel like that was unfortunate.

Grace: Especially considering we have this whole media history of the slutty characters are the first ones to die. The girl who has sex in the horror movie is always the first one murdered. And there is still very much this idea of sexual promiscuity and characters' needs to be punished, and they die. And it's kind of brutal and it's messed up. And, it was one of those things where when we got to that part, it was just a moment of "Really? Was this necessary?"

Jarrah: Yeah. It's so awful.

Grace: It just comes all at once too. And it's like, "Oh, now all the characters are getting killed off left and right."

Jarrah: Yeah. And I liked the idea that they would be able to maybe use a psychic bond with T'Shael to sustain them, but that didn't really go-

Grace: Nope.

Jarrah: -that far.

Grace: Yeah. There's just a specific point in the book where people just start dying left and right, and it's really jarring. There is an earthquake on the planet that literally opens up the ground and swallows one of the antagonists and he's just gone from the book forever.

Jarrah: Yeah. Krazz.

Grace: So, the secondary antagonist is the main bad guy.

Jarrah: Yeah. And Krazz had a cooler name too, so it was a bummer.

Grace: Krazz had a cooler name, and I more wanted to see what was going on with him, honestly.

Jarrah: Yeah.

Grace: But no, he just gets literally swallowed up by the Earth.

Jarrah: Yeah. So, the thing with the Deltans and also sort of what you're saying goes back to the premise, I think, a little bit to this idea that the Federation's peace is being held together by people's children or family members, the fact that they know they're safe is what is, and that they're being held as leverage is partly what's preserving the peace. And so, when people start dying also, and they hear about it back in Starfleet pretty fast.

Grace: Yeah. They're all like, "Oh, this is so tragic." It's like, "I feel like you guys are having kind of an underwhelming response to this."

Jarrah: Well, it just feels like there's never really any serious threat that there would be war in the Federation, which is supposedly what the Romulans who kidnapped them or who got the Klingons to kidnap them, that was supposedly the goal, was to foster infighting and we don't really ever see it.

Grace: No.

Jarrah: So, it undermines, I think, a little bit of the premise of both the Romulan plan and also even existence of the Warrantors. Like, that you would go to this length when even after four of them are dead, no one's.

Grace: The Romulan plan is pretty shaky already.

Jarrah: Yeah.

Grace: There is some issues with this plot, but my main issue is just the fact that they reach a point just very suddenly where people just start dying all over. And T'Shael's betrothed just dies because she goes into Pon Farr, but she's okay because she's unconscious the whole time. Wait, we're just going to just hop, skip, and jump over that? Okay.

Jarrah: Yeah.

Grace: That was built up as a big deal, but I guess it's not definitely.

Jarrah: There's some, like, very high stakes at certain points, but then everything gets resolved. Like, you can't really see any outcome other than them surviving because they're such central focuses of the book.

Grace: Yeah.

Jarrah: But, yeah, I don't know. It's challenging. But can we go back to Jasmine Al-Faisal while we're sort of talking about the Federation?

Grace: Let's do that with Cleante's mother, the Earth ambassador.

Jarrah: Yeah, Earth president, I think. Yeah. Prez of--

Grace: Who's the only character we ever really get any pushback for Cleante's sexual promiscuity on, because I guess they were going after the same guy at one point.

Jarrah: Oh, yeah.

Grace: But that's uncomfortable.

Jarrah: But I feel like it's more judging her mom because it also has comments-- like, it makes her mom seem very superficial. There's even a comment about her plastic surgeons and her weight, which, again I feel like most of that I'm going to write off as the book is 33 years old. I feel like today that it would maybe less of an obvious play to have someone be sort of antagonist because they're a vain woman. But it almost makes it seem like-- even at the end when she makes up with Cleante, it's like she needs to overcome her vanity and focus on her duty to her child.

Grace: Fun.

Jarrah: But cool that they're Muslim, which also would not maybe be as easy of a sell today in a book that Earth's going to be led by a Muslim president. So, that's a sort of a positive diversity piece.

Grace: Yeah. That's something. We might think differently if we actually were either of us Muslim and had a deeper look into what that kind of representation would mean, but who knows?

Jarrah: Mm-hmm. Or even just reading the book and figuring out, how it's portrayed because it does really feel like it's not there in any meaningful way other than them occasionally mentioning Allah.

Grace: Yeah. Yeah, that's about it.

Jarrah: So. Yeah. Do you have any other thoughts on T'Shael and Cleante?

Grace: They're interesting characters. I really actually dug the backstory that we got with Tishante-- [crosstalk]

Jarrah: T'Shael.

Grace: T'Shael, my God, I mixed their names up. I'm not even that invested in their relationship and I portmanteaued the two together [Jarrah laughs]. Crap. So, with T'Shael's backstory, the whole aspect that she's closed off and reserved from other Vulcans because her parents were very famous and she wants to be a person of her own, but closed off emotionally from other people because she knows her dad died of this horrible debilitating illness that she watched him suffer through, and she doesn't want to put someone else through that and has all these emotional issues with that. I thought it was really cool how we got that full characterization with her and not just she is the Vulcan registered trademark.

Jarrah: Yeah.

Grace: And it definitely made for an interesting foil for Cleante, our human character. So, I appreciated both the characters as individuals. And again, as I felt like there could have been more done with the dynamic there in terms of the fact that we really did stay in that whole kind of, "Well, the Vulcan is the wiser one and having to temper the temper of the impatient human," and all that until the end, in which case-- we'll get to the end. That felt a little stock but I liked the characters as they were.

Jarrah: Yeah, definitely. Also, I guess maybe just to clarify, for anyone who hasn't read the book, when we say it's hella femslashy, like there's no explicit, like we got no kissing sex between them.

Grace: It's all very platonic slashy [laughs]

Jarrah: But when you're reading it, you don't have to get that far in before you. You start coming across things like, she looked at her and saw the same hunger in her eyes that she felt.

Grace: Oh, they had a deep and profound relationship.

Jarrah: The hunger for knowledge.

Grace: The hunger for knowledge in those glittering eyes. There's lots of wistful staring and shit.

Jarrah: Yeah. Again, I don't really know what the intention was, but certainly use of the term "T'hy'la" is the fact that it can go towards lover and that there's all these scenes of T'Shael asking Cleante what love means and that kind of thing.

Grace: They very much fall into that whole trope of, "Will you tell me of this human thing of love?"

Jarrah: Yeah.

Grace: Just nonstop.

Jarrah: There is a part where it says that like the Deltan women stopped hitting on Cleante probably because it was very clear she was heterosexual.

Grace: No, I felt that was a, "Wow, this writer doth protest too much." I think it's three separate times that they went out to say, "Cleante, who was totally heterosexual, by the way." And it was at that point that was like, "I don't buy it. I don't buy it at all."

Jarrah: Yeah. So maybe it was like, either she was and things are changing, or that it was just an effort to keep people from being too scandalized.

Grace: [laughs] No, she's absolutely heterosexual. Because we told you so, wink.

Jarrah: All right. Well, we should probably address the uncomfortable topic of the sexual violence and torture in this novel, because it was something I was not totally expecting.

Grace: I was not either. Especially not for the first, like, act and a half of the book, I was not thinking that would actually happen. And then again, the death happens, and then it's just like, "Oh, all bets are off now."

Jarrah: Yeah. And actually, we should definitely put a content note at the beginning of this episode.

Grace: Yeah.

Jarrah: As I just feel like if you're going to recommend this book to someone, also just mention that because it's quite a lot to get caught off guard. Yeah. Like, more than I expect for a *Star Trek* novel for sure.

Grace: Yeah.

Jarrah: Yeah. So, they're in prison for a good six months on a deserted planet. They got two captors. The Andorian dies pretty quickly enroute to the planet.

Grace: Like a punk.

Jarrah: So, there's the three Daltan's and the two protagonists. I do wonder why they never once try to overpower the guards.

Grace: Yeah, that's doesn't make a lot of sense.

Jarrah: I feel like a neck pinch to one of them and the other four could maybe take the other one, but I don't know. So, I would have maybe appreciated at least them plotting a bit more, but they seem very resigned to being prisoners the whole time.

Grace: They're like, "Oh, well, this is happening." We've got the Andorian dies because he's like, "Come on, we can take them." And I'm like, "Yeah, you guys probably could take them."

Jarrah: Yeah. I mean, at that point, they're still on a ship with more people, but still, it seems--

Grace: Worth a shot, even--

Jarrah: Yeah.

Grace: Way to be proactive, guys. Moving on to the less pleasant stuff, the Deltans are essentially tortured to death by being kept separate from each other.

Jarrah: Yeah. So, they've got this sadist guard who's not the one who dies in the earthquake, but the main guy named Kalor, and he's like, "I'm sick of babysitting these prisoners that we've been told to treat well, ultimately, I'm going to kill them all. But I'm going to like, do it as part of this psychosocial experiment so that we can like, get more information on our torture literature as Klingons."

Grace: Because apparently this Klingon was just Klingon Hannibal Lecter all along. And they just didn't really drop that in until they did.

Jarrah: Yeah, it didn't seem-- Like, him being the worst bad guy didn't seem totally surprising to me, but it's definitely very disturbing. And also, the threat of rape is right away. It's like at first, they have this whole discussion about basically which one is going to be your-- whatever you call it, like your server or something. And they decide that they don't want to rape the Vulcan because they won't get enough of a reaction. And they go to rape Cleante, but the Deltans use their pheromones to confuse them.

Grace: And then, they don't really do anything with that again.

Jarrah: Well, they sort of say later on that the effect seems to have worn off.

Grace: I don't think that-- Is that how pheromones work? Just, they stop working after a while?

Jarrah: Well, it says like maybe the Klingons have got used to it. The Klingons have got used to it and so they're like less able to be addled by the Deltan sex pheromones. I don't know. We're missing Sue's Science Corner for that one.

Grace: That felt like just such a Chekhov's gun showing up in the first act. And then we just, "Oops, forgot there was a gun."

Jarrah: It's odd that they don't, as a group, take time to try to plot how they could best use their strengths to get themselves out of the situation.

Grace: Man, they're all just such a passive bunch about it. But because the Deltans need each other to survive, separating them, it causes two of them to die and one of them commits suicide rather than be separated from them. So, that's pleasant.

Jarrah: Yeah.

Grace: And again, felt really unnecessary.

Jarrah: Yeah. It also just made the rest of it like a little-- It made there be fewer dynamics to explore because you only suddenly had two people and then this super sadistic captor.

Grace: And then, we have the falling action after they've all died of them being like, "Oh, well, the Romulan commander is here now and she's demanding amenities for them and everything. So, they're getting a better situation." But everyone died. We're not really addressing that enough, it feels like.

Jarrah: Yeah, no, it's pretty-- Okay, I really liked the Romulan commander being in it. I found like, the parts with Romulan commander were my favorite parts of the book.

Grace: I liked her too. I just felt like she came in a little late.

Jarrah: Well. And then she's also trying to make things better for them, but they still end up in actually the worst situation they've been in, where Kalor is experimenting on T'Shael by making her stay out in the freezing desert overnight because Vulcans can't tolerate the cold very well. And then also simultaneously sleeping with Cleante.

Grace: We say sleeping with.

Jarrah: I was going to say raping, yes. [laughs]

Grace: Yes, we say sleeping in the sense that Cleante decides she's going to seduce him in order to try and get better treatment for T' Shael, which is essentially coercive rape.

Jarrah: Yeah, totally. I was going to say, the book is unfortunately not super clear that it is rape.

Grace: Yeah. And they go out of their way to be like, "Oh, Cleante couldn't understand why she was doing this and why she was getting into it with him." It's like, "I'm not comfortable with how this book is addressing this topic."

Jarrah: Yeah. And she has parts where she's thinking about like, "Okay, I feel aroused. So, what does this say about me?" kind of thing. And I think a lot of that is really unfortunate.

Grace: And that feels like where the plot does get slut shame-y.

Jarrah: A little bit. Yeah. And certainly, not clear because, ultimately, it's forgiving of her, but it shouldn't have anything to forgive.

Grace: No.

Jarrah: It's like she was trying to protect T'Shael. She had very few choices. Ultimately, it did save her life. And like, how she felt about it minute to minute doesn't change the fact, that she was being coerced into that position. And even though she took an initiative there, she didn't have a choice.

Grace: But if we can jump back to the Romulan commander, and this ties into all of this, the fact that she shows up, puts in changes and then those changes are pretty much avoided by the Klingon captor. What we see happening a lot in this book is either an absence of these characters making decisions or them making decisions and it just having little to no effect on the outcome. Like, she decides she's going to sleep with this Klingon guy who's keeping them captive. But then, Starfleet shows up to save them anyway eventually. And it's just very odd how the characters don't affect the plot very much.

Jarrah: Yeah. Actually, there's another example. There are some points where you think something significance happening and it doesn't. Like, T'Shael begs for more book tapes from the Romulans.

Grace: Yeah. That felt like it was setting up for something and it just wasn't.

Jarrah: Yeah. And they're like, "Oh well, we'll get you these book tapes. But you know what really do you want them for?" And she's like, "Oh, I just want to practice my Romulan." And it would have been awesome if it had been part of a secret plan that she knew that there was something in this book that would help them and then they could have been self-rescuing princesses.

Grace: Yeah. I thought like up until the final hour is like, "Okay, when is your plot--?" There's no plot here. They're just letting this happen, okay, which was a touch on the disappointing side. On the other hand, when we say that these two main female characters have a very intimate and deep bond and all that and again that it's not a sexual thing or any explicit relationship between the two of them, I did appreciate the fact that this book was really investing-- Even if you're not looking at it with the slash goggles, it's very much saying these two's platonic relationship and their friendship is very deep and important and powerful as much so as if it were a romantic relationship, which feels important because we, as a society, don't really value that as much as we should.

Especially in terms of popular fiction and storytelling, the idea is usually that romantic attachment conquers all when just, honestly, the power of friendship and the power of love for another person, even not in a romantic sense, is very important and is important to all of us as people and that should be given a little more credit where credit is due.

Jarrah: Yeah, for sure.

Grace: Especially in the lack of representation we see for asexual persons and the fact that not every deep important relationship is based around sex. So, I appreciated it on that level.

Jarrah: Yeah, that's totally fair.

Grace: That said, when it gets-- Can I jump to the end for a bit here?

Jarrah: Yeah, absolutely.

Grace: When it gets to the end and they're rescued by the Federation and Cleante says, "Okay, so I was having sex unprotected with a Klingon. I might be pregnant here. If I am pregnant, will you help me coparent this child?" feels like a very writing on the wall, like, "Will you be my forever girl?" situation.

Jarrah: Mm. Well, and even still they are clearly-- At the end, T'Shael is almost like she's slowly committing suicide. She's deciding not to heal herself.

Grace: What's going on with that? I just didn't really get that.

Jarrah: And she does say basically, "Stay alive for me." And she makes that decision even after she knows she's not pregnant. And then, the very end, "Let's travel to Earth and do a bunch of fun stuff together."

Grace: If she had been pregnant, I probably would have thrown something.

Jarrah: Yeah, no kidding. I was also very glad that was not happening.

Grace: Don't do this to me book. Don't play me dirty like this.

Jarrah: But yeah, you're right that all of that speaks to a really deep bond. It doesn't necessarily speak to a sexual bond, which is totally fine.

Grace: Yeah, I'd like the idea of there being more canonical same-sex relationships in *Star Trek*, but it doesn't have to be that way. It can just be a platonic, intensely emotional relationship. That said, I will fight tooth and nail for more same-sex relationships. But it is what it is. The book came out in the 80s.

Jarrah: Yeah, totally.

Grace: Hence, one of our cover girls being Sean Young.

Jarrah: [laughs] So, another thing which I found came up a lot in reviews on various blogs was or even Goodreads, some people were like, "Where are the Enterprise crew? I didn't sign up to read this book about these ladies."

Grace: They really are the B plot. They're the B plot to these two original characters. That said, what we do see, we get to see Sulu having badass adventures, which is, as I understand, in the preview for the book at the very beginning, that's kind of the selling point that they're going with, like, "Oh, yeah, Sulu's going to go in this deep cover mission to save these hostages." And what we do get to see of that is pretty freaking cool. I just wish we'd seen maybe a little more of it. Most of the time I was reading this, I was like, "Man, somebody picked up this book hoping for Enterprise crew adventures and was very disappointed." [laughs]

Jarrah: Yeah, the size of Kirk and Spock's heads on the cover was-

Grace: I know.

Jarrah: -not proportional to the space in the book, which I was totally fine with. [laughs] Zoe in our Goodreads group said, "I liked the references we got to the crew and the small snippets of them we did get to see. My personal favorite was page 109 where Uhura talks about waiting during missions. I feel like this was calling out the show for not giving her a bigger role and showing us that this character would have been an asset on away missions."

Grace: We do. We get some really great interactions with the characters. And I felt like Margaret Wander Bonanno really had the characterizations down pat and was having some real fun with them. Like, when we get them just hanging out and Kirk being like, "I'm bored," and everyone else being like, "Okay, if you're not bored, then we're all just rushing around freaking out about something. Slow your roll, Jim." And then we get to have Scotty pretending he's super hammered to [unintelligible 00:39:36].

Jarrah: That was really fun.

Grace: I loved that. And I loved what we got to see of Sulu's undercover Romulan mission and just how much he loves that he's out there doing the spy thing.

Jarrah: Yeah, it was a little bit funny. I think they're all referring to Sulu as, like, this--

Grace: D'Artagnan is his code name.

Jarrah: Yeah. But they were talking about him being this young buck who's just going off and doing these things, sort of like Reed in Enterprise when he's off doing things which seemed a little bit like, I didn't really see Sulu as that much younger than him, but I guess he was. I love the Uhura stuff.

Grace: I love that she's just friends with all of their deep space communications people. And it's just like, "How's the baby?"

Jarrah: And there's like a couple nice just subtle things too about Spock's thoughts about Kirk and Uhura. There's one part where it's in Spock's mind about how indispensable both Kirk and Uhura are to him.

Grace: Yeah, indispensable and personally important.

Jarrah: Pre-Spock and Uhura being a thing in the JJ verse, but not in a romantic way again, but just that they're very important to each other.

Grace: In an, "I value your friendship," kind of way.

Jarrah: Yeah, yeah. I really liked it, and it didn't bug me that it wasn't the focus of the book. In fact, I think the beginning Enterprise stuff where they're just bickering with admirals didn't really add a ton. But later on, when it's like the scenes of them talking with each other and thinking about what's happening and their relationships with the other communications people and stuff, that was really quite lovely.

Grace: For what little of the Enterprise crew there is, it's pretty good. And that said, I would read more by this author. I would be up for seeing more of what she's written with these characters.

Jarrah: Mm-hmm. I mentioned that there was this sort of change post publication of this book in the *Star Trek* licensed materials, which I gather there was another editor that came in and just cracked down on--

Grace: Isn't there always?

Jarrah: Yeah, on a lot of the things. And this also led to the death of the Rihannsu series that we talked about in a previous episode with Diane Duane and a lot of the stuff that had

really boosted fandom and been very intertwined with fandom from the very beginning of *The Original Series*.

Grace: This book is dedicated to Diane Duane also, isn't it?

Jarrah: Yeah, yeah.

Grace: To John M. Ford and Diane Duane for their contributions to our knowledge of the empires. The author is most grateful.

Jarrah: Yeah. So, there was a lot of contribution to the way that fans were interpreting these things because there was no canon stuff happening at the time to fill in these gaps.

Grace: It really was a fill-in-the-blanks situation, and a lot of people were getting creative with those blanks which, respect.

Jarrah: Yeah. So, I don't know. How do we feel about the fact that this changed?

Grace: I will say the same thing I say about the retconning of a lot of further canon and deep lore. The same thing happened when we got the new *Star Wars* movies. A bunch of stuff was just thrown out the window and that is that there were a lot of people putting a lot into this expansion of the canon when it was something finite. And while it's not gone forever, just because it isn't canon anymore, and just because a lot of it is changed and backpedaled on doesn't mean it doesn't exist anymore. It is a little bit of shame to have all of those people's contributions kind of-- I won't say diminished but discredited a little bit like that. There is a loss there, it feels like, in terms of what was put out into the world in these people in an attempt to again fill in these blanks and add on to what was at one point, finite.

Jarrah: I think someone else also in our group might have raised that comparison to the *Star Trek* Expanded Universe. I mean, *Star Trek's* a bit different in that, as far as I understand, other than those like original *Star Trek* novelizations of the episodes that they were always considered apocryphal. But basically, I do think that when you look at the stuff that came later, it wasn't like that you necessarily did away with books that were hard to read. The writing quality didn't always get more consistent. It was more about the subject matter. And I do think we lost some more of the creative stuff and particularly stuff that was expanding more towards women characters and queer characters even if they're sort of very heterosexual.

Grace: Very heterosexual. [Jarrah laughs] But if I can, because I can't stop referencing him, pull a Stephen King quote, just because the adaptation is changed, just because the movie was different than the book, doesn't mean the book isn't there anymore.

Jarrah: No, absolutely. And obviously the fan creations didn't stop, they just moved online. But I guess it's got so bad that the ability for some fans to receive some like professional recognition and money from that work didn't continue in the same way.

Grace: It's a pain in the caboose which is, I think, part of why we're doing this whole book club, I honestly think.

Jarrah: Yeah. And actually, I mean-- so now where we're at in terms of the *Star Trek* novel-verse was pointed out that the like Simon & Schuster contract, I believe.

Grace: Yeah. Owners of Pocketbooks, which does the distribution and printing of most of the mass market *Star Trek* books and the majority of their tie-ins.

Jarrah: Yeah. And so, they had no women on their list of novels in the next round of *Star Trek* novels.

Grace: Shocking.

Jarrah: So, I feel like, as-- I will link to this in the show notes in case I have it not stating exactly what the definition of the problem is correctly. But I think that regardless of how you're going to deal with like the content of the books-- in the more recent *Star Trek* books, we do have some queer characters. We have some nonbinary aliens mostly.

Grace: We're gaining ground just microscopic, speck by speck.

Jarrah: Yeah. But you still also need to be vigilant about the diversity of your authors that you're hiring.

Grace: It's not infinite diversity and infinite combinations if it's as described by the same five guys.

Jarrah: Yeah, yeah, exactly.

Grace: Oh damn, now I want Five Guys. [laughs] Crud.

Jarrah: Yeah. So, maybe I'm down with more books.

Grace: Diversity maybe?

Jarrah: Yeah, yeah. I don't know. Do we have any final thoughts on this book?

Grace: There were things I really liked about this book. There were things that made me very uncomfortable with it. Again early on, just being like, oh yeah, this sexually active group with an 11-year-old problem to a grinding stop and just led to a kind of, okay, we're just going to walk around that, I guess, which I thought I was going to be able to, but then other things happened in the book. It's like, "Wow, we're just kind of sidestepping a lot of things here, aren't we?" Deltans are sexually active preteens. And that's just what you do, I guess. Yay?

Jarrah: I guess I was already sort of prepped by Kes, [Grace laughs] so that one didn't actually jump out at me to the degree it could have, but it was definitely for me I wished I had a content warning on the sexual violence and torture.

Grace: Absolutely. Yeah.

Jarrah: It feels also difficult because I mentioned that it was like six months, that also feels like very long, very long for a *Star Trek* episode.

Grace: It does. And it also feels like the characters-- call me crazy here, but it didn't feel like the characters were very phased by just how long they've been in captivity and-- Argh, I don't really know how to articulate it. It felt like there were some odd reactions there.

Jarrah: Maybe you could say that on the other hand, it's not realistic that they would actually be solving these problems so fast, given how big space is.

Grace: I guess, there's a lot of directions we can question it in.

Jarrah: Yeah. And maybe that's like an advantage of a novel format, is that you can look at what would actually happen here.

Grace: Yeah.

Jarrah: Yeah, I just wasn't expecting it to be quite that intense. And for me, up until the point where Cleante is being coerced in order to protect T'Shael, I feel like up until that point, it wasn't mishandled. It's just that I wasn't expecting it.

Grace: Yeah.

Jarrah: But I feel like it needed to be clearer that was assault. Even if it was just after they get rescued, someone stating that--

Grace: I do appreciate though that when we get the point of her having to go over everything that happened to her, she is upset by it, and we get from McCoy just said, "No, no, you do not interrupt her. You let her be upset. She needs to get this off her chest and process this in her own way." And I appreciated that in terms of characterization and in terms of someone processing something really awful that happened to them.

Jarrah: Yeah, definitely. My favorite parts about it, I liked the Uhura stuff. I liked the Romulan commander kind of bonding with T'Scael in a way. The Pon Farr thing was odd, but everything about Pon Farr is odd.

Grace: Yeah, I like that we get the Romulan commander has a love interest and they're having a bit of a torrid love affair.

Jarrah: Oh, yes. Yeah, Actually, I love that.

Grace: Yeah.

Jarrah: Yeah. It was like cool dynamic.

Grace: Get it, girl.

Jarrah: She's holding a candle for Spock, but guy's totally loyal to her. That's awesome.

Grace: Yeah. He digs it. He's like, "You're my lady. I'm all about you."

Jarrah: Yeah.

Grace: And also, Sulu, getting to do deep undercover work was pretty fun.

Jarrah: Yeah, definitely.

Grace: Yeah. So, yeah, overall, there's some good stuff in this book, but also some stuff we wish we had known about getting into it.

Jarrah: I can definitely see why it was suggested to us.

Grace: Oh, totally. Yeah.

Jarrah: All right, cool.

Grace: Well, if you would like to recommend our next book club book, do it.

Jarrah: Yes. Head on over to our Goodreads group. We have a thread called “What should we read next?” We have a few suggestions in there, but always taking new ones. Or if you want to vote up someone's suggestion, you can do that. Yeah, we'd love to hear from you and we'd love to hear what you thought of this book. You can flip us an email at crewwomenatwarp.com or you can comment on our social media, we're at [@womenatwarp](https://twitter.com/womenatwarp) on Twitter and Instagram and on Facebook. And you can visit our website at womenatwarp.com.

Grace: Just to establish before we finish this episode, the crucible in question is friendship.

Jarrah: Really?

Grace: Really.

Jarrah: I totally missed that. [laughs]

Grace: The crucible was inside of all of us all along.

Jarrah: Oh, was that also the moral of *The Crucible*?

Grace: I think it was the opposite with that one.

Jarrah: Okay.

Grace: But I'm not Arthur Miller. What do I know?

Jarrah: Yeah, no, that is-- You're definitely right. But I was just confused because I just thought the title was so dramatic, and I didn't even pause to think about what it actually meant.

Grace: The crucible is friendship. The crucible is friendship.

Jarrah: Whoa.

Grace: Jarrah, where can people find you online?

Jarrah: You can find me [@jarrahpenguin](https://twitter.com/jarrahpenguin), that's J-A-R-R-A-H-Penguin on Twitter.

Grace: And I'm Grace, and you can find me on Twitter [@bonecrusherjenk](https://twitter.com/bonecrusherjenk) and dwelling in the Crucible of my friendship with my cohosts.

Jarrah: Oh, and for more from the Roddenberry podcast network, visit podcasts.rodnenberry.com

Grace: Friendship. It's magic.

Andi: Hey, everyone. I'm Andi, and I unfortunately had to miss this episode because of a technical issue. So, I am here, by popular demand, for Andi's Monologue Corner, in which I will talk very briefly about some of my thoughts on this book.

So, first off, I liked this book. I thought it was good. It was interesting, I enjoyed it. I thought the writing was pretty good and, overall, some interesting themes. That being said, it was also dark as hell and hard to read at some points. And I really kind of wish that I had known that some of themes were going to go as dark as they did because there were moments that were genuinely upsetting. The Deltan slowly dying was horrible. It was horrible. Not in the

sense that, badly written and more in the sense of I suffered reading about it. So, yeah, maybe I could have done with a little less of the torture.

And especially, the rape stuff kind of felt not necessary in some places, and I understood where she was going with it. She was trying to show that they were in the *Crucible* or whatever but not the most fun thing to read about. And Grace pointed this out during the episode and I really wanted to reiterate this. The characters were so passive. They did not drive the action. They didn't make any of their own decisions. I feel like that was part of theme. Like, what do you do when all of your choice is taken away from you and what choices are left to you? So, I get that thematically. But also, it gets frustrating because you want them to do something to fix things, or at least try to fix things.

But pros, hella gay. Like, so hella gay. And specifically, femslashy, which I don't think there's enough of. And I really enjoyed that. I really enjoyed these characters and I really enjoyed their relationship. And I really enjoyed the analogy for Kirk and Spock, which was very obvious. I feel like overall this book probably doesn't hold up as much as it could have in our time period now. And I kind of think of it as a time capsule almost to how quickly and how thoroughly attitudes have changed towards these sorts of themes and how we talk about sexual assault and how we deal with it. And so, for that, I think it's pretty valuable.

And I really dig the kind of late 70s, early 80s sci-fi nostalgia of it pretty much where the cover especially, Grace mentioned how awesome that cover is, like, this is the kind of stuff that you would find in a used bookstore, or at least I would when you were a kid and read and just be completely immersed by. I don't know that it is appropriate for now, but it is definitely a sign of the times in which it was written, and for that I think it's really interesting.

So, thank you to the people who recommended this book to us. I personally enjoyed it. Also, just as an aside, I want everyone to remember that the moral of *The Crucible* is rocks are heavy. Thanks so much for listening.

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