

Three Patch Podcast – Episode 106

A Study in Fiction: Crashing the A-List

July 1, 2020

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A Study in Fiction: Crashing the A-List

Consulting Fans: Alexxphoenix42, Emma, Caroline, Cumbercookie, Producer/Editor: Alexx – Three Patch looks at this 2019 novel by Summer Heacock with a character based on a certain Sherlock actor we know and love.

(Music intro: Cake, Fashion Nugget: Open Book)

Lestrade

What's going on?

Sherlock

This is hard.

Lestrade

What?

Sherlock

Really hard, hardest thing I've ever had to do. Do you know any funny stories about John?

Male voice singing

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*She's writing. She's writing. She's writing a novel.
She's writing. She's weaving, conceiving a plot.
It quickens. It thickens. You can't put it down now.
It takes you. It breaks you...*

(Music fades)

Alexx

Greetings, Three Patch listeners. Welcome to another installment of A Study in Fiction. This time we're looking at a recently published novel by Summer Heacock that came out in July of 2019: Crashing the A List. It ties into the Sherlock fandom because one of the main characters is reportedly based on a certain British actor near and dear to our hearts. Of course, I'm talking about Caspian Tiddleswitch.

Multiple speakers

[giggles]

Alexx

I'm Alexxphoenix42 and I'm joined by:

Caroline

Caroline.

Cumbercookie

Cumbercookie.

Emma

And Emma.

Alexx

So if you're not familiar with this book, the premise is that an out-of-work editor named Clara, along with some help from her plucky sidekick friend CiCi, is temporarily cleaning out some old storage units. They recover some paper records for an escort surface operating in the 90s and find information that a famous actor was one of their sex workers. They have a dilemma of what to do with this hot information. All right, what did you love about this story?

Emma

One of the things that I really loved was how just the humor of it. All of these... So Caspian Tiddleswitch is so obviously Benedict Cumberbatch, like the author just winks every time

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she talks about him. So like, he's like this really British actor. He's got like this famous like, wavy locks of dark hair, and this icy stare and cheekbones and this really velvety deep voice, right? And he's played a famous TV detective and he's like, been in some comic book movies, and on and on and on. She even has him dressed in the purple shirt of sex at one point.

Cumbercookie

Yeah, that's what I was gonna say. The fact that I laughed my ass off throughout basically the entirety of it, not only just with the references to Benedict, the, the dressing gowns and just every single mention of like... chuckle. And I felt like Clara was very just kind of relatable in a way. You know, she gets caught in her living room with her fuzzy nerdy PJ pants and Doctor Who t-shirt or something. I was like, yep, hi, that's me. So I kind of like, I like that she felt like a human being. And again, I just loved laughing at it. I loved laughing at this book.

Caroline

I definitely agree. It is super-- It's fun and breezy. It's a very quick read, and I enjoyed the hell out of the ficness, the fanficness of it. And it is just a highly cheeky book. And it's, I don't know. That part of it was novel in -- I mean, no pun intended -- but for a traditionally published book, that part of it was like, novel. It feels like a book that was written, you know, quote, by one of us? And fun. I don't know, the humor of it was-- It feels just like a rom-com. That's just what it is, a rom-com. And I am... maybe the reason why we did this?

Emma

I think yeah, you are.

Multiple speakers

[laughter]

Caroline

Because I-- and I'm gonna link to the stupid thing, but like, I kind of live tweeted my fun with this story. Cause I had a lot of fun with it when I read it back in February. It was right before COVID started and I still have the library book. And I haven't been able to return it because COVID--

Alexx

Me too.

Caroline

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--is keeping the libraries closed. So they're just like, keep this book. And so I'm not really well-versed in romance in general, but this was interesting.

Alexx

Yeah, I have to say I really enjoyed the relationship between Clara and CiCi.

Caroline

The best friend.

Alexx

Yeah, the best friend. I think often in romance novels, the friends are just very sidebar. And I felt like Clara's relationship with CiCi was as important, if not more so, than the relationship that she's spinning up with Caspian. And so I just love some of the inside jokes that they had. And the witty banter is so cute throughout the whole book. I mean, that was, that was fun.

Emma

I honestly would have been happy if Clara had ended up with CiCi.

Alexx

I know, right?

Emma

I thought that they were a good pair, and I was kind of shipping them for most of the book.

Alexx

I did too. I was starting to wonder there for a while if maybe there was suddenly going to be a switcheroo and they would realize that their platonic relationship had something a little more to it. Hmm.

Caroline

It is unfortunately not queer. Like textually, and that was part of my-- I had to caveat people who were like interested because I was live tweeting the damn thing. I was like, it's straight, I'm sorry. It's straight. Like if it were a fic, it would be rated Teen. There's a hard fade-to-black about like, yeah, about sexual stuff for a romance novel.

Alexx

Yeah, it is very fluffy. And if you're used to reading explicit, you know, rated stories, this one is going to come across as, yeah, very fade-to-black.

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Emma

I don't know if I'd call it fluffy. This, I would not put this book into the fluff category if it were a fic.

Alexx

No, you're right. There's a lot of angst.

Cumbercookie

Yeah. It was like back and forth. It was like fluff, angst, fluff, angst, fluff, angst, and it just was like whiplash, but I enjoyed the giving of the whiplash.

Emma

Yes. Thank you, may I have another?

Caroline

It would have tags.

Cumbercookie

Yeah, it would have taaaags.

Emma

It would, it would. Yeah. That's a great point, actually. I'm not used to reading things that don't have... that aren't just like really thoroughly tagged and so there were some things that came up that kind of caught me off-guard, that I would have expected a tag for.

Caroline

Yeah, exactly. I totally get that. I totally get that.

Alexx

All right, is there a line or a scene that really stood out for you?

Emma

I think the scene where he shows up first in the... without giving too many spoilers, the first time she meets him, he's just completely like Sherlock in that scene. And you know, he's absolutely like first, season one Sherlock. He's absolutely just like this character who's just obnoxious in the way that Sherlock is, and sort of cool and calculating in the way that Sherlock is. And that was really fun to read. Because it was just, you know, another one of

those sort of wink-wink moments where it's like, this is really supposed to be Benedict Cumberbatch.

Cumbercookie

I honestly, every time I tell one of my friends about this awesome book that I read, I always go back to the scene where her mother shows up out of the blue, because his response to her bull, just--

Alexx

Oh, yeah.

Cumbercookie

I was dying. I had to stop reading halfway through and then again three-quarters of the way through so that I could laugh enough to keep reading.

Alexx

Right, the mom's a real busybody and Clara's never quite figured out how to deal with her. And then Caspian has a couple of one liners that just has her with her mouth open and the flies buzzing and--

Cumbercookie

Yeah, she reminds me of my grandma and all I-- I could just imagine somebody saying that stuff to my grandma and the look of like, abject horror on her face.

Caroline

I was going to say, the meeting scene. Can I say deduction? Because like, that's the crazy part to me. Because there's an actual deduction and you're like, what universe am I in? Because it's like, wait-- are you supposed to be Caspian Benedict Cumberbatch Tiddleswitch, like, but you're deducing like you're Sherlock? I was so, I mean, like it was so out there and I was just sort of like reading it. Oh my god. What is happening? And I didn't know what was happening. Like I just didn't know. But the other scene that comes to mind for me is this scene where they're trapped in a small cold place. The storage unit? I just thought it was very, it was very ficcy.

Alexx

Yeah. There are some moments in the book that really stood out for me that I just found charming. The main character Clara names a lot of the inanimate objects around her. She drives this truck for work and she named it Brutus, and she's sleeping on her brother's couch and she names it Gertrude, and she keeps going on about how uncomfortable it is.

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And at one point she visits Caspian Tiddleswitch's very posh hotel suite, and she falls in love with his couch. So like I'm shipping this girl and this couch, Jasmine. And she's like saying that the pillows are so soft they're made of unicorn fur. And I was like, I wanted her and that couch to get together.

Caroline

She literally says, I'm coming back for you, like--

Alexx

I know!

Cumbercookie

Someone needs to just write it, like a little vignette where her and that couch just get to be together.

Alexx

Because she doesn't-- I don't really think she really did have a good moment with Jasmine.

Cumbercookie

No, I don't think she ever gets to see her again after the moment, the thing. The not good thing.

Alexx

Yeah, it was couchus interruptus.

Multiple speakers

[laughter] Nice. Dang.

Alexx

All right. Well, let's jump into another question that I had. We've already talked a little bit about this, though. Although this is a published work it has some similarities with fanfic. What jumped out at you as being something that maybe came from fanfic culture?

Caroline

When Emma said, oh, there's like nods here and there, I felt it was like her just staring at you like, I dare you to bring this out--

Alexx

Into the camera?

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Caroline

Yeah. The book is one huge inside joke.

Cumbercookie

Yeah, pretty much.

Caroline

And the fact that like, there's other fandoms sort of referenced, like his name is Caspian. He goes by Cas. So it's sort of like, were you on Tumblr in like 2012? Do you remember anything about a Cas? Does that sound familiar? The main character's name is Clara. You know, like from Doctor Who. Like it's just, Cas from *Supernatural*, like, there's like one long inside joke. The deep voice, the Poirot.

Emma

Yeah.

Alexx

That was lovely. Benedict Cumberbatch as Poirot.

Caroline

The *Star Trek Into Darkness* type movie. Yes.

Emma

And he's doing Shakespeare in New York and--

Caroline

Yes, he was like, oh, he's Hamlet and Othello, and all kinds of other things.

Emma

And it goes beyond just like Sherlock and Benedict Cumberbatch, right? She makes fun of YA lit-- so the character Clara is like an editor for YA. And so there's some mocking of certain tropes in young adult literature and there's discussion about how something, I can't remember what they call it. It's not Amazon, but there's an Amazon-like company and how evil it is.

Caroline

Alcatraz.

Emma

Alcatraz, yeah. It's a lot of like in-jokes. You're right. It feels like it's one long like in-joke.

Alexx

Yeah, I wanted to just start tagging this as if it were fanfic. Like, I wanted to do self-insert, real person fic, enemies to friends, you know, kind of stuff. Trapped together confessions, cold.

Emma

Fake relationship.

Alexx

Yeah, fake relationship.

Caroline

I think it'd be a lot easier to enjoy if it had fic tags. Because yeah, it does have certain situations that deserve foreknowledge. You know, tags.

Emma

I think that's one of the things that I found interesting about reading this, that-- I so rarely read published fiction anymore. Like, you know, if I'm reading a book, it's nonfiction or you know. So typically, if I'm reading fiction, it's fanfic. So I'm really used to the way that fanfic tropes play out and I'm used to the ways that authors approach things. And so some of the stuff in this was kind of a shock, in a way, and I don't read enough romance to know if these were typical romance ways of approaching these tropes. Or if this was this author's way of approaching the tropes. That's something I don't know. And so the things that I struggled with as a reader, were handled really well by the author, but they're the kind of things that I'm so not used to seeing.

Alexx

It threw off the rhythm, maybe, of what you were expecting?

Emma

Yeah, there's a certain set of expectations that you have when you're reading fanfiction. When you're reading like a romance story, you kind of know how it's gonna go. But I also get the sense that this is not a typical romance, because it didn't follow sort of what I know are the tropes of typical, like, heterosexual romance, so.

Alexx

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Right.

Caroline

Do you think it differed greatly-- like so, not comparing it to fic, but compared to rom-coms?

Emma

It did not feel-- I guess this didn't feel like a rom-com to me. I mean, there were funny moments, but there was so much angst and the main character Clara spent so much of the book hating herself for things that I thought, honey, you-- no. That's not your fault. You know, please. I wanted someone to, like her friend CiCi to sort of say, "This is not your fault" more, or something.

Cumbercookie

I was gonna say you know, as far as this kind of being fanficcy, if you've ever seen-- It's like a Tumblr post, I think, where the person while their parents are on vacation, they take everything in the room and move it three inches to the left. That's what-- This felt like an AU exactly like that. Like they just moved everything three inches to the left. And Clara is me just three inches to the left. And you know, Caspian is Benedict just three inches to the left. That's what the whole thing felt like. It was just a slightly alternate universe.

Emma

Right.

Alexx

Yeah, I, in my youth, read a lot of romance novels. And I would say this is not at all like a typical romance novel because I really see the relationship of Clara and her friend CiCi as being the main relationship in this story. So I would put this more as a buddy flick, you know? This is more that CiCi and Clara are working together to help Clara get out of a, you know, a bad patch in her life. And Caspian is just kind of-- He comes and goes. He's really almost not a main character. I really put him like slightly second tier, you know. He doesn't spend that much time on screen, as it were. So I don't know if I would call this a romance novel.

Caroline

Interesting. This goes into like some of the plot things that happened later, in terms of like, the ups and downs like, the general rhythm of the whole story. And what I was thinking was... There's a betrayal part that happens, I don't know, two thirds through, something like that, that I know some of you don't like, and I get it. But when that happened, I actually

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thought, Oh, this is the part in the movie that, just when you thought everything was like, things were not going to go perfect here. Things have to crash right now. Yeah. And because of that, I was like, sort of expecting it. And if the forgiveness was easier, I was like, it's like, rom-com universe. Right? Rom-coms specialize in doing things like not respecting boundaries and not having, not giving you any privacy, and making your lows even lower.

Emma

And just being cruel for no reason to each other.

Caroline

Yes. And then they get together at the end. So that's just.

Emma

And actually, I will say that this author did a fantastic job of making me believe that and buy that. Like I was, I spent a lot of the book really angry at both of these characters. Every time the characters did something that to me was just like, unforgivable, I'm done. Like the next chapter, the author would make it clear that it was unintentional, that there was a miscommunication. And it wasn't like the miscommunication trope that you see in fic. Like it was real, true miscommunication that you could not avoid. Right? There's just no way to avoid it. So like, that part it was really well done. And so every time something could have gone really off the rails, the author brought it right back again. And I appreciate that craft and that skill. It still wasn't fun for me to read, though.

Cumbercookie

At one point, you know, at that kind of two thirds point, I was a little confused because everything seemed to be going okay. And it kind of looks like we tied up all of our loose threads and I was like but there's a lot of book left. Where's the crash and burn? And then the crash and burn happened, and so I was like ready for it, but at the same time I was like, arrgghhh.

Caroline

You know, when you look at the clock, and there's still like 23 minutes left in Law and Order, and you're like, well...

Multiple speakers

[laughter]

Caroline

Something's happening.

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Cumbercookie

You just don't know what it is yet.

Emma

The interesting thing about that, though, is that in fanfic, more often than not, when they get to that point in the story, the thing that disrupts them is coming from outside. And they have to kind of team together to work through it. Like, if they get together halfway through the story, then that point, like, 75%--

Caroline

They stay together.

Emma

They're staying together, and they have to fight this thing together. And it like strengthens their relationship, right? And that didn't happen here. And so, like, there was a thing that pushed them apart again, and that-- I wasn't expecting that, somehow? I guess I'm just so used to fanfic.

Alexx

Yeah, what this brought to my mind is when I first started reading romances way back in the dark ages, the guy in these het romances would be horrifying. He would be very rich and powerful. The woman would be like a secretary or just someone who was in his thrall. And he would, yeah, definitely have her in a very imbalanced power situation. He would be a total asshat through the entire book. But then the last, like, literally five pages, he would suddenly reveal, you know, some deep inner secret of why he'd been acting like this. And, you know, the woman would forgive him, and oh, they're together, and they live happily ever after. And I sort of felt like this was harkening back to those earlier kind of Harlequin novels that I used to read. It's just not a very modern relationship template.

Cumbercookie

Yeah, and I want them together, but at the same time, it's like, oh, after the second time, I could feel like this could be salvageable. But after time number three, oh, I think you should maybe not, for your own good.

Emma

I think that what I like about the way the story ends is that, there is a moment where he comes clean, but it happens after she calls him on all of his bullshit. And after she says, "No, I'm done. That's it. We're not doing this anymore. I can't, like, you've hurt me too much.

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You've been too cruel. Goodbye." And so when they actually do end up meeting again at the end, Clara does not let him off easy. That like, ending... That last chapter kind of made it all work for me.

Alexx

So one thing I enjoyed about getting off of the rom-com trope that this book has done at times, is that this is definitely a journey for the main character, Clara. She's at a really low point in her life. She's been unemployed, she's sleeping on her brother's couch. And part of her getting back out of that and finding herself is finding a new place to live with her friend and finding her dream job. So it wasn't just, get the guy, you know. It wasn't just get married, move to the suburbs, have kids, I've reached my Pinnacle goal as a woman. She really did have other things she wanted to do. And Caspian was just part of it.

Emma

A lot of her sort of ideals for herself are based on sort of that she has to be able to, like, stand on her own two feet and she feels like she's not gonna move back in with her parents. She's gonna stay here even if she has to be homeless. And like, you know, doing a job that, you know, she's physically not really capable of doing, right? She's like a little tiny person, she has to lift all this big stuff and load up a truck and take it to the dump and all this. Like she's so determined that she's gonna make it, you know, on her own.

Alexx

Right. So, what would you say to someone who hasn't read this, to tell them to give it a try?

Caroline

Well, I mean, if you want the full caveats, I think just listen to this recording.

Cumbercookie

Yeah.

Multiple speakers

[laughter]

Caroline

You know, if you don't necessarily need the caveats, I have a Twitter thread that got a bunch of people to read it, I guess. Wasn't exactly my purpose, but like, I went ahead and did it. And I will link to that in the show notes, I guess, so that you can look at the thread. Apologies to the author, if she ever listens to this, because I did quote like whole passages. Oh, and the author, just in general, there's a YouTube video, which is how I found her,

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where she wore a Benedict Cumberbatch shirt, like a, like a promotional picture from TAB. And that's how I found her and I was like, she seems like a funny girl. I am going to go and like, find this book because it's apparently a Benedict Cumberbatch fic scrub. So if that perhaps entices you, you can also watch the video on YouTube.

Alexx

Yeah, I would tell folks if they are a connoisseur of all things Benedict Cumberbatch, that this would be a fun thing to add to your collection.

Cumbercookie

Yeah, I think if I... I have a close friend who I would probably recommend this to at some point and it would probably be something along the lines of, it's very funny. It is very funny. You will laugh, especially because you know fanfiction. You know you're gonna understand all these fun inside jokes, but just be mindful that it's gonna be a journey, lots of jumps up and jumps down. So like you're gonna laugh but be warned, you're also probably going to get upset too.

Emma

I was expecting it to be kind of a beach read. And it wasn't to me, at least for me. Maybe for other people it would be, but it wasn't like a beach read. It was actually... It dug deep into some things about gender and power dynamics that I wasn't expecting. And that made me uncomfortable and that kind of colored my whole experience. So I think I would tag it, in some sense?

Alexx

Any other last thoughts?

Caroline

I would love to hear if people read this book.

Emma

Yeah, if you disagree with us.

Alexx

I think this would make an excellent book club pick because it's not just a fluffy romance. You know, there's more going on here. And I think a group could have some interesting discussions about it. All right, well, I want to thank you guys for showing up today and talking about Crashing the A List. Talk to you later. Bye!

Multiple speakers

Bye.

(Music outro)

Male voice singing

But you don't know which page to turn to, do you, do you, do you...

(Music fades)

Transcription Team

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>, produced and edited by Emma Grant.

Contact

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Music

A Study in Fiction – Cake, Fashion Nugget: Open Book

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