

Women at Warp Episode 9: Book Club: Uhura's Song

[Women at Warp theme]

Andi: Hi. And welcome to Women at Warp. Join us as our crew of four women's *Star Trek* fans boldly go on our biweekly mission to explore our favorite franchise. I am Andi.

Jarrah: Hi. I'm Jarrah.

Sue: Hi. I'm Sue.

Andi: And today, we're having our very first book club discussion, which is super exciting. So, over the last couple months, our crew has been reading *Uhura's Song* as our very first book. I hope that you guys have had a chance to join the discussion on our Goodreads page. So, I wanted to start out with some of the comments from there. Jarrah, did you want to read the first one?

Jarrah: Sure. So, Mike says, "I rarely need an excuse to read this novel. It's been a firm favorite of mine since I bought the paperback when it was originally published. It has to be said, a lot of early to mid-original series novels were lacking in many areas, and perhaps this is why I tend to treasure *Uhura's Song*. Remove the Trek and you could still have an exceptional piece of sci fi storytelling.

It's the focus on the characters and the creation of intelligent cultures that seems to combine perfectly, and the trappings of Trek are just that. Although no question, Janet wrote the crew of *Enterprise* very, very well." And so, that was from Mike.

Andi: Yeah. I think that he gets at some stuff that's really true there, and we'll discuss it more throughout the podcast. Read our other general comment from Ruth.

Sue: "It's wonderful to spend time with these characters we know and love. But to feel they are really human beings rather than characters loosely anchored around the plot of the week, and this is particularly true of *Uhura*. I came to Trek through watching *TNG* on its first airing on BBC way back when. I had seen a few of the classic Trek movies and loved them. *Voyage Home*. Whoop." That's what she says. [laughs]

"But never cut more than an episode or two of *TOS*. I'm now part of the way through Season 3 of my first full watch, and I must confess I'm amazed at my lifelong perception of the *TOS* crew as an ensemble is in no way backed up by the paltry amount of screen time given to the non-Kirk, Spock, Bones characters.

One of you remarked on your Oh Captain podcast, how do you get an actress as wonderful as Nichelle Nichols and just squander her presence by literally consigning her to the background? So, yeah, I'm really enjoying Kagan's take on the inner lives of these characters. It makes you ache for missed opportunities and for the possibilities that exist for future series in the hands of some thoughtful and diverse writers." And that's from Ruth.

Andi: Yeah. I really like both of those comments. And thanks very much for getting into the discussion on our Goodreads. We're going to keep that going and hopefully, grow it as much as we can. So, *Uhura Song*. I hope you've read it, because if not, we're about to spoil the heck out of it for you. If not, maybe pause and then go and read the book and come back.

Jarrah: It's a quick read.

Andi: It is. It flows really well, so it's easy to read. So, I thought we could start with just a basic synopsis. So, we start off with basically a plague on the planet of something I'd never be able to pronounce, because it is literally all vowels, Eeiauo.

Jarrah: Let's call it Eeiauo.

Andi: [chuckles] It's spelled E, E, I, A, U, O. I was really impressed that she managed to get so many vowels into one word with no consonants. Very nice. So, it wasn't hard to read, but now that we're going to have to say it out loud, I'm like--

Sue: I was thinking it was kind of like meow, [Andi laughs] but without the M.

Andi: That is perfect. That is now [Sue laughs] my head-canon for that, Eeiauo.

Jarrah: [laughs] It totally works.

Andi: Okay. So, we have this really terrible disease on Eeiauo. ADF, it's called. We start with McCoy trying to find a cure for this disease. It's pretty clear that this is a really big problem, which I think is good, because it adds to the stakes. So, what do we think of the setup, I guess?

Jarrah: Did you mention that the Eeiauoans are cat people?

Andi: I didn't. You know what? That's super important, because that's basically the reason we decided to read this book.

Jarrah: [laughs] We're all cat people. So, we're like, "Cats in *Star Trek*." I think that the description I read of this book basically said it's about Uhura using music to unite two estranged planets of cat people, and I was like, "We are in." But that comes up super quickly in the book too, because right away, she just does a really good job writing both original characters and the original *Enterprise* crew. Like, I love McCoy is treating these patients, and he's super invested in curing this disease, but he also makes time to gripe about the fact that the cats get their hair on everything.

Andi: Yes. And I also like how she brings up the nictating membranes a lot. Like, she uses that in describing the diseases. So, for people that are not as cat lady as we are, the nictating membranes of a cat eye is basically like that extra eyelid underneath. You'll see it when cats blink really slowly, which, by the way, is like cat for I love you, because they trust you enough to blink really slowly. So, she definitely knows cats. I say that right off the bat.

Jarrah: She knows cats and bones.

Andi: Yes, definitely. Of course, Bones would get annoyed with all the cat fur.

Sue: She knows this crew.

Andi: Yeah, absolutely.

Sue: In reading this, there's no doubt about it. They're all spot on.

Andi: Absolutely.

Sue: Everybody, it's fantastic.

Jarrah: That's really interesting, because she had to research the whole series and watch all the episodes. I feel like she grasped it for someone who didn't really have that background.

Sue: Can we make the people who write a lot of *Star Trek* novels research the characters that they're writing?

Andi: This is my first one. So, I guess I'm being spoiled right off the bat, because I was really impressed with how she nailed all of their voices right away. So, that's definitely a strength. It's something that I think continues throughout the novel. It's not all based on the show either. Some of it comes purely from what our characters would do in this new situation based on what we know about them. And that, I think, is harder to do than people think.

All right. So, moving forward through the plot. So, we find out that Uhura has a friend named Sunfall who is a Yawin. I love that now. And so, she starts to unravel this interesting twist that the Yawin's might not be from Eeiau. They might be from somewhere else.

They won't admit it, but she has a couple of these songs that her friend Sunfall taught her that seems like that might be the case. She goes to Spock, and Spock and her put their heads together in a really lovely way, I think, and Spock does some scientific analysis, then decides that, "No this is not their planet of origin," which really makes things interesting, because that means that maybe the cure for this disease is not within this planet. Maybe it's somewhere else.

I like that Uhura's love of music is not something that you would think would be used as an actual problem-solving device. And in this case, it is, and then it just fits really well together with having Uhura coming from a purely emotional creative standpoint, and then Spock being coming from the scientific perspective.

Jarrah: Because she's restraining her emotions out of respect for the fact that they would make him uncomfortable, and he tells her not to do that because he respects her and respects the emotional intelligence she has. And that's really cool.

Andi: This book makes me like the idea of Spock and Uhura together way more than the JJ movies does. Because I actually can see it in this book, why they might be drawn to each other. Whereas in the movies, I feel like they just threw them together. They do have this really lovely scene where they all demand that Spock be human. And she says, "But you're not human, Mr. Spock. Any more than Sunfall is you're unique. If I sometimes find your behavior shocking, I've come to realize that even the shock can be valuable. You make us stop and reconsider, and sometimes take a fresh view of things."

I just think that's really nice, because they expect him to react like a human quite often. And that's where a lot of the emotional arc of his character comes from. But it's pretty rare that they go, "You're not human. We shouldn't expect you to be." Well, not fully human, I guess. But he wants to be Vulcan. I think that comes up too, in this book, that he wants to be seen as Vulcan.

Sue: That is a big theme of this book as it goes on how people want to see you and how you choose to identify. But there's a whole part for the Eeiauans and the Sivaoans [chuckles] two races of cat people about choosing their name, because for them, names have meaning. It does mirror what Spock and Uhura are going through when her friend Sunfall is sick. She wants to present that she's pulled together and not too emotional, but she is. She's basically freaking out inside. Spock wants to be Vulcan when everybody else wants him to react like a human.

Andi: Basically, accepting other people's differences as a part of them and not judging them for it. So, moving forward, we get an extra layer of urgency in the fact that this ADF syndrome becomes communicable to humans. And Nurse Chapel gets very sick. So, we've established through this really great series of scenes of the crew working together to find this planet of origin for the Eeiauoans, because they will not talk about it to the point where we have one of our characters, she would rather kill herself.

Sue: It turns out that the people of Eeiauo were essentially exiled from their home world. It's this huge shame that is around whatever event that happened. I think they say up to 2,000 years ago. It's Quickfoot, isn't it?

Andi: Yes, Quickfoot.

Sue: It's the doctor who is helping McCoy who breaks down and says, "Look, I'll tell you what I know, but it's such a shameful thing that after I tell you, I'm going to kill myself."

Andi: Oh, we should talk about some of our new characters. We have a lot of original characters in this book.

Jarrah: And 75% of them are women.

Andi: Yeah. There's a handful of male characters when we get to Sivaio, but for most part, the new characters are all women. Quickfoot being the doctor that's helping McCoy on Eeiauo, and then--

Sue: Oh, I think I used the wrong pronoun for her though. I think I called her a he.

Andi: So, Quickfoot. And then, the biggest new character that we get is Dr. Evan Wilson, who is the acting chief medical officer while Bones is on the planet. So, she basically joins the crew for this adventure.

Jarrah: We also meet Dr. "Micky" Mickiewicz,-

Andi: Yes.

Jarrah: -who is commander, I guess, of a medical ship that comes to help out when the humans start getting infected, and she's helping Bones with stuff as well, and she's pretty badass.

Andi: We also find out that the *Enterprise* has a crew member that is Felinoid is how they put it. She has this amazing name that I couldn't even begin to pronounce. I kept reading it as Snnanagfashtalli, something like that. It's like Snnanagfashtalli.

Jarrah: It's cool, because they call her Snarl as a nickname. But then, Wilson gives Kirk a lecture on how that's not her actual name, and you guys should actually make an effort to call her by the name she wants to be called. It goes to that theming about how you want to identify and how other people should respect that throughout the book.

Andi: Absolutely. Kirk agrees with this. It's nice, because Evan's ready to fight about it and he's like, "I'm totally with you." And apparently, it hurts to say her name because it's very guttural and he still makes the effort to do so.

Sue: Now, is she the same one that is in *The Animated Series*? Because I haven't started watching that yet.

Jarrah: No, *The Animated Series* is M'Ress, who's Acacian in this she's not defined as Acacian. And in *The Animated Series*, she looks like a lion woman, and she's voiced by Majel Barrett, and has a hilarious purring sound. So, a different character.

Andi: Yeah. But she is the one that apparently Evan learns how to fight cat people with. Dr. Wilson has been having fun fighting basically everybody on the *Enterprise*. She actually injures Sulu, and then she also does some bout with-- God, I have to call her Snarl, because I have no idea how to pronounce that. I swear I would try if I had heard it pronounced, but it's written, so I had no idea.

Jarrah: I think that was on purpose that the author made it, so we would know it was really hard for humans to pronounce.

Andi: I promise, Snarl, if I met you in real life, I would try pronounce your name correctly. Okay. So, I think that's all of the new characters we really get. We get a couple of small ones. I like how some of the random ensigns are all women. They really have a lot of female characters here, but none of them really make a huge impact. It's just nice to see that their default wasn't all dudes.

Sue: Yeah. And then, we get more when we get to the other planet, the home world.

Andi: Yes. And so, the bulk of this book is spent on Sivaio. So, have been given orders from Starfleet, and, hey, apparently, the president of the federation is a woman. So, they get the okay to ignore the Prime Directive. So, that's how serious things are, that they are going to go to this planet and do First Contact, and they're going to be completely open about it and spend the rules a little bit, because things are so dire. So, the away party is Spock, Uhura and Kirk, Chekov and Dr. Evan Wilson, and they meet up with this race of new cat people.

Jarrah: The landing party introduces themselves. And basically, as soon as they say why they're there, the Sivaioans freak out.

Andi: There is a similar cultural taboo among them to never speak of the exile. Both the exiled and the people left behind, both of them have the same cultural taboo not to speak of it.

Jarrah: There's also a weird difference between the languages of the two people because of how they've changed overtime. But Uhura manages to use her knowledge of the songs to be able to do the physical gestures of greeting that let them know that they're friendly.

Andi: Yeah, which is awesome. They do this claw-- I picture what Guinan does when she's going to fight Q, the claw hands. That's what I was picturing.

Sue: [chuckles] The way they describe it though-- This is where we get cat people again. It makes me think of when cats are kneading, the claws come out and then they retract. Also, she's essentially using the language that she sang and these songs that she learned from Sunfall to speak this ancient dialect in what they call the old tongue which makes me even more annoyed that she essentially was reading out of a Klingon dictionary in the movies. But that's another story.

Jarrah: That's exactly what I thought of too. I was just like, "This is what we're supposed to see is," a communications officer who's a linguist who can make these kinds of leaps and say, "Well, these are the older words, and I can reconstruct some elements of this language from that."

Andi: So, the Sivoans are at first. Obviously, this is a culture that doesn't have star travel. They're very wary of the crew because, they've come out of the woods and they're like, "Hey, what's up?"

Jarrah: And they don't have fur or tails, this weird clothes and stuff.

Andi: Uhura gets right in the level and she picks a Sivoan Jinx who looks like Sunfall, and she actually sings to them, and that is what breaks the ice. I think it's really beautiful.

Jarrah: Yeah, definitely.

Andi: So, this is also when we get some of our new Sivoan characters. Some of them are super awesome. Actually, this whole first scene of the *First Contact* really illustrates one other thing that Kagan does amazingly well, which is describing a new culture to us in a way that makes sense. You can absolutely see why this culture exists the way it does. She does a really good job of explaining how *First Contact* would go down.

Sue: This is real anthropological sci-fi. It's fantastic, because *Star Trek* does not do this a lot.

Jarrah: Mm-hmm.

Sue: Sure, this culture is this way, but why is it this way? Why did these traditions come about? What does this mean?

Andi: Yeah. Her world building is top notch.

Jarrah: Yeah. Right off the bat, we get to see that gender roles basically don't exist, at least not on a visible level to the *Enterprise* crew. Chekhov actually sees child Sivoan and says, "As far as sex went, he hadn't the vaguest idea, but he supposed it didn't really matter much at this age, especially since he had seen nothing to indicate sex roles in professions or chores."

They actually originally think Uhura is pregnant, because she has visible breasts. As cat people, their breasts would only swell when they were pregnant. So, it's interesting that they're basically right off the bat explain that, "Gender is meaningless." They have pronouns that they use, but they don't have roles in terms of their social structure.

Andi: It's also very clearly-- The parenting is very much, it takes a village. But you can see that they have all the adults in the village fulfil the same roles for them. Okay. So, we also get some of our most important Sivoan characters here. So, Bright Spot is our other teenage girl. Jinx being the other one. We have Catchclaw, who is their doctor. And later on, we find out that Stiff Tail is their leader. And they're all women. They bring up the Eeiauoians and their plague situation with Stiff Tail, who is their leader, and she immediately is like, "Nope," and she knocks Kirk right out.

Sue: Well, that's because he's asking about the people who have left, straight off the bat.

Andi: Yes.

Sue: So, she's not like, "Nope to visitors." She's like, "Nope, you don't get to know about that."

Jarrah: Yeah, you're being impertinent.

Andi: Yeah. I think it's interesting from our perspective, because we don't know yet, because cuffing, which is what she basically does to him, is actually something that they do to each other quite a lot. They cuff the children whenever they step out of line.

Jarrah: There's one point where Dr. Wilson steps out of line and does something without Kirk's permission and he lectures her. The cat people are going, "Did he cuff her?" It's like, well, he cuffed her with words. So, they liken it to getting a verbal scolding from an authority figure.

Andi: Yeah. This whole idea of the cuffing starts off one of the things I really like about how Kagan writes this whole situation, which is the nonverbal communication. She tells about their whiskers, how they flick their whiskers forward for this. Their tail is very useful in communication, where their laughter is actually looping their tail. They will also wrap their tail around somebody to show affection and pulling their tail as a way to tease them. There's a lot of really cool stuff there in which it's understandable why they would use these cues. You actually get used to them quite quickly. She'll use them as a way to indicate the various Sivoans moods later on.

Jarrah: So, they basically decide, it's worth it to stay there and try to develop a relationship with these people. And Kirk tasks Uhura with trying to get the clues that they need about the cure. Wilson tries to build a relationship with the doctor. Catchclaw is the doctor? Yes?

Andi: Mm-hmm.

Jarrah: Basically, everyone's going about in their own way, trying to win their trust, so they can get the information about the cure.

Sue: Wilson also really connects quite a lot with Bright Spot, who's the daughter of Stiff Tail. She's written as a really rebellious teenage girl, but very thoughtful. She picks up very quickly. She's very curious and smart. She definitely becomes, for all of the crew I would say, the one that they trust to ask their questions. She's an entry point for them into the culture, because they feel like they can talk to her in a way that they can't talk to almost anyone else. There is some professional relationship going on between Catchclaw and Dr. Wilson as coworkers almost. But I think Bright Spot is really the one that they get through to right away.

Andi: Yeah. She's more curious and she wants to impress Dr. Wilson.

Andi: They have this small little scene where she wants to use the tricorder. She picks it up really, really quickly. She's just having so much fun with the tricorder. I can just picture they bring all this new stuff, and they just want to play with it.

Jarrah: Yeah, totally.

Andi: So, we spend a while in the camp. Actually, I would say too long.

Jarrah: No, I agree. It was definitely, I wouldn't say it got boring, but there were parts where I was like, "Get on with the action." [Sue chuckles] Like, Chekov invents this awesome shelter building, and then they teach him how to build a shelter. That was cool, getting to see Chekhov do stuff. But I don't think it really told us anything about the people or the plot very much.

Sue: I think was a lot of world building, just more and more of it, of the cultural thing upon cultural thing.

Jarrah: Yeah.

Sue: I think it all came back around in the end, but I can see where people would think that we're just there too long with nothing else happening. But they finally figure out that none of the adults really want to tell anybody about this mass exodus of people, because they don't consider them adults. I think a lot of that came from humans being a lot physically smaller than the Sivoans.

Andi: Yeah, their vulnerability.

Sue: Yeah. So, the landing party starts to try to come up with ways to prove themselves as adults, so that they can get this information they need to save not only the other planet, the Eeiauons, but now this disease is spreading throughout all of the Federation worlds.

Andi: Yeah. If we're talking about one of the major themes being names and identity, this is the other one. What makes a person an adult? Because Stiff Tail actually is being fairly immature here. And then, you have her daughter Bright Spot, who, according to their custom, is a child being much more willing to help. So, they have a ritual coming of age. So, to be considered an adult in Sivoans society, basically, they have to walk by themselves with their peer group from one camp to another. It's a way to prove that they're an adult now.

Jarrah: Yeah. Because it's super dangerous. There's [Andi chuckles] dinosaur things in the woods. And if one of them doesn't make it, then they all fail.

Sue: Yeah. It's not a thing you can do alone, which is really neat. And in the explanation, that I think Stiff Tail gives it, she says that "You do this as a group because you all need to help each other to be productive in society. Nobody can do everything alone."

Jarrah: Yeah.

Andi: I like the idea of working together to overcome something. But the problem is they get so stuck in this custom that they don't know how to move past it when they need to. When we find out about the walk, this is when we find out why Jinx's name is Jinx. It's because she has tried the walk two times and been the only survivor at both times. So, even though in every way that we would judge it, Jinx is an adult, she is a child in their society. And not only a child, but almost an outcast. That's when I start to go, not sure I really dig this custom, is when it's that rigid.

Jarrah: Well, and we find out while they're on the walk that if she fails a third time, she'll be expected to commit suicide.

Andi: So, it's well done in the fact that it's a custom that makes sense. But they also show the downsides of having such a ritualistic way of proving adulthood. Because it's not like Jinx failed, because she's not competent. She failed because of bad luck. It's a really sad idea to think that they would actually consign one of their most competent and wonderful people to basically death, because she couldn't complete this ritual because of things outside of her control.

Sue: Well, the way I read it is that they're not really expected to commit suicide, as much as nobody will go with you after a certain point. Jinx says that "It's hard to find people to go with a second time. It's near impossible to find somebody to go with you a third time. And after that, nobody will go again."

Andi: Yeah. So, she'd be stopped.

Sue: If you're bad luck three times. So, she'd either be considered a child in her society for the rest of her life. Or, the other thing that happens, is that a lot of people that happens to would end up committing suicide. But I don't think they're expected to.

Andi: Well, first of all, what happens to Jinx is apparently pretty rare. But she does say that there are exceptions that she's heard of people living like this, but that she herself couldn't. So, I think you're right that it's not like they expect you to. It's more like you wouldn't be able to live like this.

So, while they're on the walk--

Sue: And Bright Spot, who's apparently just turned the age where you can start the walk, decides to join them. And then, Jinx asks if she can go again for her third time. So, being that the crew now cares a lot about these people that they've learned all this information from about this culture, the stakes get even higher.

Andi: I like that there's a moment where Kirk is like, "If this doesn't work, we have to find a way to help Jinx, anyway." He's like, "They're not going to leave her to deal with this by herself, no matter what." I think that's really nice.

So, yes, then they go on the walk. They walk from one camp to the other, and sadly, in between, there is a lot of obstacles. One of them, is that Chekov catches ADF, which we should also mention that the whole time this is going on, McCoy is frantically sciencing on Eeiauo to find a cure. He does find not a cure, but something that slows the disease, which is good, buys them more time, because we do spend a lot of time in camp.

Jarrah: But it's super risky to test it. Dr. "Micky" Mickiewicz volunteers to test it on herself, because she's also come down with ADF. That's a cool little scene.

Sue: He also finds out that there's a genetic thing that if you have this, then you're more likely to-- If you catch the disease, go through it faster to be more strongly affected by it. We get our first little hint that, "Oh, no, Chekov has this."

Andi: I love that he runs through their medical files in his head. He's like, "Are my friends going to be okay?" He's the best.

Jarrah: Mm-hmm.

Andi: So, Chekov starts complaining of being stiff and out of shape. It turns out that he actually does have ADF. It progresses very quickly.

Sue: But it is there earlier than you think it is.

Andi: Subtle writing, Kagan. Nice job. So, that obviously adds a lot of problems for the walk. It's really hard to carry someone through this when they're already dealing with a lot of stuff, including apparently, something that looks like a Saber-toothed tiger.

Jarrah: Yeah. And then, three of them get separated, Wilson, Kirk and Bright Spot, because Bright Spot falls in this rushing river, and then Wilson goes in after her, and then Kirk goes in after Wilson, and everyone's freaked out about that, but they end up being okay.

Andi: Yeah. We get some more good Spock stuff here. Just in general, I really liked how when they were doing First Contact with the Sivoans, they're like, "Mr. Spock is a Vulcan. Please don't touch him." And the Sivoans are very respectful of that. They make a point of

checking everybody's ears every once in a while to make sure that they're okay touch them. I thought that was really nice.

And then, we also have a scene where-- Okay. So, Wilson and Kirk and Bright Spot might be dead. And so, the rest of the party is very upset about this. We know Spock. Spock's working the solution rather than freaking out like everyone else is. And Uhura has this wonderful scene with him where Jinx gets very upset and is about to attack Spock, because she's like, "He doesn't care." And Uhura is like, "He does care." It's really nice.

Sue: Yeah. She basically says, "If he didn't care, he wouldn't be trying to fix the problems." And then, they talk, Uhura and Spock a little bit after that. He basically thanks her, and she said, "Well, if I didn't have to explain to Jinx what was going on, I might have slapped you myself."

Andi: Yeah. It's totally an understandable reaction. It's one that people have to spot quite often. Okay. So, luckily, everyone survives.

Jarra: Yay.

Andi: Yay. Uhura, and Jinx and Evan Wilson somehow managed to find-- Honestly, I'm not entirely sure I understood how they did this. Somehow managed to find out that ADF is actually a childhood disease. It's like, I don't know, chickenpox. It seems like--

Sue: So, how this happens? Uhura has this ancient song that essentially describes the symptoms of ADF. Evan Wilson has kept saying throughout-- I don't know why I use her full name when I talk about her.

Andi: It seems like you should. She has one of those names.

Sue: It's like George Clooney. She says that the disease, since it's basically been in two populations, could have changed differently over time. And then, I think it's Spock points out that, "Wait a minute, well, most of the Sivoans have perfect pitch." And they eventually figure out that the song that Uhura has describing these symptoms is the same tune but in a different key for a song about this childhood disease called Noisy-Baby. So, you're right. It's almost exactly like chickenpox.

Andi: Yeah. Jinx is just astounded that Noisy-Baby could be the problem. She was like, "But we use that plant right there to fix Noisy-Baby." So, they've been going through this whole terrible journey. It was just this so simple disease. Actually, that completely makes sense to me. The way diseases affect populations can be very, very different. They put together this jury-rigged injection of this plant that is needed to cure Chekhov, and they blow it up Chekhov's nose to get it into him. And it works. He is cured.

Jarra: Yeah. It's pretty awesome. And then, basically, they're able to get to the city that's at the end of the walk and re-hook up with Catchclaw and they all pick their names. It's all awesome.

Andi: Yeah. Once they find the cure, it all progresses very quickly. So, they get back, they finish the walk, they're considered adults, but they've already solved the problem, basically. So, they get on a ship and they go back to Eeiau, and they bring our favorite Sivoans with them, Bright Spot and Catchclaw and Jinx all come, and they go and cure the plague. Yay.

Jarra: They're able to bring so many Sivoans with them, because by proving people's expectations of them wrong. They shame them into, "You withheld this information that was

going to kill all these people based on this really old shame.” The people accept that that's not a good way forward.

Andi: Yeah. And so, how to wrap that up?

Jarrah: We could just go right to the ending, which is, they cure the plague. And then, we find out Evan Wilson, who, at this point, I would argue that she's really supplanted Uhura as the main character. We find out she's not really Dr. Evan Wilson, the human doctor.

Andi: Yeah. I don't even know what she is really. They imply that she's some trickster, maybe like a Q.

Sue: I think. She's a Q.

Jarrah: Yeah. So, basically, what happens is through this whole time, we find out more and more stuff about her that's unbelievably impressive like that in addition to being this amazing doctor who's able to fight Sulu and all of these people on the ship, she is a First Contact expert, she's great at climbing trees. We find out that she is able to computer program circles around Spock.

We find out after she leaves, she gets a call to go on assignment somewhere else, they try to contact her and they talk to this guy who says he's Dr. Evan Wilson. She says basically, like, she was no longer needed. She had solved the problems that the Enterprise crew is facing and she goes where she's needed and they find that she's done things under other names that are super impressive in the past.

Andi: Yeah. So, one of the most common complaints that I was reading in the reviews of this book is about Evan Wilson and about how she is basically a stereotypical Mary Sue character.

Jarrah: Okay. So, a Mary Sue, it's a problematic term. Basically, it refers to a female character that is considered to be wish fulfilment for the author. It's commonly seen in fanfiction, usual hallmarks are a female character who is considered-- maybe like people don't appreciate how smart and gorgeous they are right off the bat. But then, everyone comes to appreciate them and they end up being just super skilled at everything.

There is a male equivalent called I've seen a Marty Stu or a Gary Stu, but it doesn't seem to attract nearly the same amount of hatred and critique. So, Evan Wilson is critiqued as a Mary sue because, like I said, she's, I think, unrealistically for a human good at so many things. And everyone, even Kirk, who starts out being unsettled by her, comes around to really admire her.

Sue: I think it's worth noting too that the term Mary Sue is named after a character from a specific early fanfiction, a piece of *Star Trek* fanfiction. So, that's where the name comes from, that's why it is very associated with *Star Trek*. If anybody wants to go and find it, it is a 1973 story called *A Trekkies Tale* that was published in a fanzine, because there were no Internet boards back then.

Jarrah: If I was to write a story about Ensign Jarrah, who fell into a time warp and ended up on the *Enterprise*, and everyone appreciated how incredibly smart and gorgeous I was. [Andi laughs] And then, Riker totally wanted to bone me, but I was like, “I don't think so. I'm more of a Picard type.” And then, I saved the ship, and kissed Picard and went home.

Andi: I don't know, that sounds like something I'd watch, [laughs] to be honest.

Jarrah: Well, yeah. That's part of the thing is Mary Sue's like any character, because we have examples of men who are in these heroic roles that could be considered wish fulfillment throughout our mythology and our literature. Look at mythological heroes like Hercules. Captain Kirk could be considered unreasonably perfect. Sherlock Holmes is another one where he has personal issues, but he's brilliant and has all these skills that no one possibly could have all of those skills and knowledge.

Andi: Yeah. I just think we're harder on female characters, in general. And then, also there's this aspect of how dare this woman be good at everything and how dare women have someone to look up to in the same way that we get to look up to all of our heroes that are usually men.

Jarrah: Yeah. Women are taught to cut each other down and compete with each other for space instead of working together to open up more space. So, we're also through internalized sexism taught to dislike these characters that are about other women being better than us. That's really unfortunate, instead of just being like, "This is cool. This is something we could assign aspire to be."

Andi: I can definitely see why Evan Wilson becomes that, because I think you said that by the time that she was a better programmer than Spock, you were like, "Really?"

Jarrah: Yeah. I think that a Mary Sue can be done well or it can be done poorly. I think a couple things, different people are going to have the line at where they say this is believable. And that was my line is like, I could believe she was an amazing doctor in *First Contact* and fighter and tree climber when she started being able to out computer program Spock. Everyone loves her. And then, at the very end, I was just going, "Eh." But also, then we find out she's not human. So, maybe that changes things.

But the other thing is, I think that the fantasy, the wish fulfillment has to be something that can be related to by more than just the author as a single individual.

Andi: Yeah. I didn't really have a problem with her. The one thing I would say I did have a problem with, is that we have this original character that becomes more important than a lot of the members of our original crew, and in this case specifically, Uhura. We wanted this to be a *Uhura Song*. We wanted this to be focused on Uhura. And by the end, it's very much focused on Evan Wilson. It's not even so much that I think she's a bad character. It's just like she's a random.

Jarrah: Yeah.

Sue: I enjoyed her a lot. I think I got more annoyed with her essentially taking over the story.

Jarrah: Yeah.

Sue: Then for the most part, you could almost replace her with any doctor already on the *Enterprise*, because-- But her skills are so random or just split up her skills and abilities to the rest of the crew. It wasn't even that everything she tried she was good at. It's almost like everything that the entire landing party was faced with, she was the best at.

Jarrah: Yeah, that's true.

Sue: And that's where it gets a little eye-rolly.

Jarrah: Yeah.

Sue: I don't know, if it had been posited to me earlier that she was a trickster or a Q. Okay, maybe I would let it go a little bit more. But just the fact that she calls herself a trickster, it almost adds a little bit of a fantasy element into the science fiction book, and that throws me off a little bit.

Jarrah: Yeah, I agree. Basically, once they go on the walk is when she's really supplanted Uhura. Uhura's there, but there's one part where Kirk remarks on how strong Uhura is and how that surprises him. But she doesn't really have a key role, whereas Wilson definitely does.

And before that, Uhura is getting a fair amount of stuff in sharing songs with the Bard of the Sivoans, but Wilson just gets more and more and more. She's cool, but she ends up having this neat relationship with Spock, where Spock is really admiring her intellect and they're playing computer games, programming games against each other, then Spock loses that connection with Uhura that was so cool at the beginning of the novel.

Andi: Yeah, I would agree. I think that that's basically the only real flaw I find with this book, because some of the stuff in the middle that drags a little, I still enjoyed it. I still think it works. Whereas this, it's like you get to the end and you're like, "That wasn't really *Uhura Song* that was Evan Wilson's awesomeness."

Jarrah: Yeah. It's interesting, because Janet Kagan apparently wanted particularly this story, because she had seen Nichelle Nichols in a NASA promotional film and thought that Uhura needed "the plum role she deserved." So, she really wanted this to be about Uhura, but then she obviously also wanted to create her own original world.

She actually pitched two sequel novels to this that were basically just focused on, I'm assuming, Evan Wilson, it says the original characters that she created in this novel. But they rejected them, because they weren't interested in a series about these original characters.

Andi: Yeah. I think that you could have easily made this story without her. They could have had McCoy with them, and then have another doctor be on the planet and then they could have had all of the moments Evan Wilson have give them out among the crew, because they do have some stuff for, say, Chekov gets some really cool stuff to do with finding out that he's apparently good at building, and he's good at survival skills and stuff like that. Wouldn't it be cool if Kirk was an awesome tree climber? That makes sense to me. He likes to climb mountains.

[laughter]

Jarrah: Yes.

Andi: So, yeah, I would say that that's the main criticism I have with this book is is how that ended up. It ramps up slowly, and then by the end, you're like, "Wow, that story was about Evan Wilson," and we don't know who Evan Wilson is.

Sue: Yeah, I found it disappointing. The idea of a woman trickster god-- It's not new, but it's interesting. I wouldn't say it's overdone. Trickster gods, also, commonly in mythology, play with gender. So, they could have done more with that if they really wanted to own that that maybe she could have been a man in her different presentations.

I'm with Sue. If they had dropped some hints earlier or something that would have primed us for her being some deity or Q or whatever, then I think that would have helped. But I would have just preferred that they stuck with the original series characters a bit more. I'll also just

point out that this is not a Mary Sue thing. But something else I noticed is Kagan also creates Kagan's laws in the book,-

Andi: Yeah, I noticed that too.

Jarrah: -which is like Leffler's laws. They reference Kagan's law of *First Contact* a few times, which is, "You'll surprise you more than they will." And it's cute. I generally am not a fan of that, but I did try to check this on like, "Is this internalized sexism? As am I just not liking it because it's a woman doing it?" I don't know if either of you have read the Harlan Ellison's *City on the Edge of Forever* comics, but Harlan Ellison obviously is a huge egomaniac. They released a new series of comics based on his original screenplay for *The City on the Edge of Forever*.

There's a homeless person in them who is the truth teller who ends up getting killed. They draw Harlan Ellison's face as this character. So, I was like, "That also really annoyed me." So, I think I'm allowed to be a little bit annoyed with Kagan's law.

Andi: Yeah, it's silly.

Jarrah: Yeah.

Andi: It's like naming a planet after yourself.

Sue: I'd be interested to see if anybody else ever referenced it afterwards, [Jarrah chuckles] like any of the other novels or anything picked it up. But I'm not about to go read all of them to find out.

[chuckles]

Andi: Okay. So, we talked a little bit about some of the major themes. I think the first one that really starts to come into play is the idea of being able to name yourself, and how important it is that people call you by your right name and allow you to be who you are. I guess it's not just about names. It's about identity too.

Jarrah: I thought that there were so many examples of it, and it was across the cultures that we visited. That was really cool, because I think that's a good lesson for us in today's society to respect how other people want to be named and identified. This society, like gender pronouns didn't come up, but that's certainly something we deal with today, and also how people identify in terms of race and gender. So, it's important to check in with people and to respect their choices on how they want to be identified.

Andi: Yeah. Trans pronouns is definitely one of the things I was thinking about with this, but also what we would consider foreign names or what Americans would consider foreign names, not bothering to figure out how to pronounce them. It's just really a very subtle-- not even really that subtle, but racism. It is racist to not want to take time to try and pronounce somebody's name. I just think it's really, really rude and something that we need to get much better at.

Jarrah: Yeah.

Sue: I know people who do have difficult names that they're just sick of essentially hearing their name pronounced incorrectly. They start going by a nickname or they just say, "Oh, just call me this or that." It's a little sad.

I think Uzo Aduba actually tells a story about how she asked her mother when she was young if she could start going by-- I forget what name it was, but some very traditionally Americanized name. She says her mother sat her down and explained to her, "This is what your name means and this is why it's important to us." And she never asked that again.

Andi: You see that in Hollywood too where people with very-- Jennifer Aniston, that is not her name. Her name is very Greek, stuff like that.

Jarrah: Or, even going back to the era where women used initials like D.C. Fontana, so people didn't know they were women. Just like people not being able to use their authentic identity, because it doesn't fit into the mainstream culture.

Andi: You know, we even have an example of this with *Star Trek* with Alexander Siddig, who now goes by Alexander Siddig, but used to go by because he's Sudanese.

Jarrah: Siddig El Fadil.

Andi: Yeah. So, I understand why actors and people would want to change their name, because it must get so frustrating. It's also really sad that they have to. So, I really, really love this theme, and I think she does a really good job of portraying it in a believable and nonpreachy way.

Jarrah: Mm-hmm.

Andi: So, especially the most overt version of this is everybody coming back after the walk and being able to choose their own name. I do like that Evan Wilson and Kirk have this moment where she tells him that she calls him Captain, because that's how he sees himself. And then, later, when he gets a chance to choose his name, he tells people to call him Captain without even thinking about it. That's who Kirk is. That's his identity is Captain. So, I just think that that's really beautifully done in this book.

Sue: I really love that. Early on, Jinx hears the universal translator give Uhura's first name as Star Freedom. That's how it translated into their language. So, after this walk and after the bonding that the crew has done with the Sivoans, she names herself another Star Freedom.

I was ready to tear up at that, because what an impact that they have had on this character's life. She also names herself to Eeiau, which she's basically spitting in the face of her culture and saying, "You don't want to deal with this, but I'm going to deal with this, and I'm going to go with them and I'm going to help these people who are related to us." Like, way to go another Star Freedom.

Andi: Yeah. I love that after she chooses that name, it's not just the Sivoans, who are used to this process. It's the crew too. They start calling her another Star Freedom. And even Kagan as an author, starts calling her another Star Freedom.

Jarrah: The other theme that I really liked is theme about adulthood and what it means to be an adult. I think that it's most succinctly captured. There's a line that Evan has where she's talking to Bright Spot and Jinx about Stiff Tail and the others not wanting to resolve this problem. She says, so "Who's more adult? Someone who works like mad to avoid a problem or somebody who works like mad to solve it?" So, there's this idea that being an adult means that you're going to not hide from uncomfortable truths and you're going to face things head on. I think that's cool.

Andi: Spock has a moment where of Jinx, he says, "I consider her to be quite capable of taking responsibility for her own actions. As she has shown by her care for Mr. Chekhov, willing to accept the responsibility for others as well. It is difficult to assess the maturity of a person or of another species or culture, but in my estimation, she is an adult. I like that as well. The idea of adulthood being able to take responsibility for yourself and for others."

Sue: There's also a scene that Jinx has with Dr. Wilson where she's saying, "You're a doctor." I think Jinx replies something like, "I'm not even an adult." She's like, "No, you have a patient. You're treating your patient. You're mixing up this medicine that he needs. You're a doctor." That's I think around the time that Jinx starts seeing herself as a doctor, she's calling herself a doctor, and she's thinking of herself as an adult and thinking, "I don't need somebody else to tell me anymore that I'm this or I'm that. I'm deciding for myself who I am."

Jarrah: It's really interesting that it's not just about-- I think in our culture, adulthood is considered very much about independence, like financial independence and independence from your parents, like moving out, figuring out your career. And in this, it is being more fully able to pull your weight in cooperation with the rest of your society.

Andi: Yeah, because I was thinking about how we consider adulthood. And obviously, for legally, it's an age. It's a number, right? 18. But I'm thinking about myself at 18 and other people I knew at the same age. It really varies, doesn't it? It's not based on age. It's based on maturity and experience. It's not as simple as putting a number on it.

Jarrah: Yeah, absolutely.

Andi: I was trying to think of comparable rituals that we have in our society. One thing that I was thinking of is the Amish have a coming-of-age ritual called Rumspringa, where they basically let their teenagers go out into the larger world and then make a decision on whether or not they want to stay within the Amish community. That was something I could think of. But for the most part, I feel like we have a handful of unofficial rituals. But I don't think that we-- [crosstalk]

Jarrah: Grad, [laughs] prom.

Andi: Prom was one of them that I was thinking of graduation, turning 21.

Jarrah: I would have rather gone on a dangerous walk through the forest than have to do my prom and grad again. Just saying.

Andi: I had fun at my prom, but I certainly understand-

[laughter]

Andi: -the feeling. But yeah, that's what I was thinking of, these cultural touchstones that we consider as these coming of the age moments.

Sue: Well, there's the bar and bat mitzvah too.

Andi: That's true.

Sue: Even though that happens at 13 and that's what we here consider very young culturally. It's like, you have responsibility for yourself now, right?

Jarrah: Yeah. Well, that's because it is such an old tradition too. The idea of adolescence is pretty new idea, historically speaking, in Western society. But I think even now that our social

definition of adulthood is being pushed further, because we aren't seeing that same, as soon as you graduate school, you've got a job and you're having a kid right away. Like, all of these things that used to be considered markers of adulthood are getting pushed off or people are choosing not to exercise them.

Andi: Well, I don't even consider myself an adult, [Sue [laughs] and I'm 30. [Jarrah chuckles] The other day, I was watching *Star Trek* and I was eating cinnamon toast crunch out of Tupperware, because I hadn't done my dishes and I was sitting there thinking, I am 30 years old. What is wrong with me?

[laughter]

Andi: I'm not married and I don't have a home. I don't plan on, getting married and having kids for a while. I think that everything just keeps getting pushed back.

Sue: I would think if we really want to find something to equate to the walk would be the college experience, or at least, what is the stereotype of the college experience. And I'm not even kidding.

Jarrah: Definitely rather fight saber-toothed tigers.

Sue: No, but because you're leaving home in this stereotype, you're going to another town or another city and you're dealing with new people and you're trying to get through it and maybe you go to tutoring, and that's the group aspect of it. [Andi laughs] But when you're done, when you leave college, you're expected to have this level of maturity that you didn't have four years ago when you graduated high school, even though nobody teaches you how to be an adult. Even though I have two years on Andi, I will still eat cereal out of some Tupperware.

Andi: [laughs] But then, that also brings up some interesting ideas of, like, not everyone goes to college. Does that mean that people who start working right out of high school become adults faster? Like, I think that there are some really interesting dynamics there.

Sue: That's why I say the stereotypical college experience, [chuckles] because not everybody goes through that. Yeah.

Jarrah: So, we should probably wrap up. But I did just have a couple super quick little moments from the book that were my other little nitpicky critiques. [laughs]

Andi: Okay.

Jarrah: They're all just to do with Evan Wilson being, I would say, like a little bit objectified. I don't think she was over sexualized at all. I think she was given a really well-rounded character, but it was just the way the guys were behaving towards her. So, there's this part near the end where Chekhov has been super sick, and they blow the plant stuff up his nose, and he wakes up and he goes, "Captain, where am I, Sir?" And then, Captain Kirk goes in a most enviable position, "Mr. Chekhov, with your head in Dr. Wilson's lap." And I'm just like, "Oh,"

Sue: Yeah, that was a come on. [laughs]

Andi: Yeah. And then, Bones at the end threatens to spank her. [laughs] That's fairly true to the original series. We got Kirk threatening to spank Eleanor of Troyius and stuff, but still gross. And also, this is 1985 when this book was written, so I'm expecting a slight degree

better. And at the end, she kisses Chekhov goodbye and McCoy goes, "Don't I get a kiss too?" And I'm like, "Ugh."

Andi: I think it's Chapel, he says, "Good girl, I did notice that."

Jarrah: Oh, yeah.

Sue: Yes.

Jarrah: Chapel, really, she just gets sick and then all that we see of her later, is that she's feeling very insecure about the fact that she's lost her hair. So, we don't really see what's going on from her perspective. It's already a substantial book. I don't think we needed Chapel's perspective, but it's a little bit disappointing that she's mentioned and then--[crosstalk]

Sue: She was essentially in a coma for the entire book.

Jarrah: Yeah.

Sue: Well, I think Sulu gets a little shortchanged too, if we want to be fair, he says three things. But [laughs] he's not self-conscious about his hair.

Jarrah: Yeah, I just found it a little disappointing that she doesn't have really anything happening from a position of strength.

Sue: Yeah, absolutely.

Jarrah: But overall, I thought this was a really fun book and I would highly recommend it. A lot of the standalone novels, it's hard to tell. I thought this was maybe going to be ridiculously bad and entertaining, but it was actually really good.

Andi: Yeah, I really enjoyed it too. As we have discussed, there were some flaws. It was not perfect. But I had no problem reading it again. It's a really fun book and I really like what she's trying to say with it.

Jarrah: And if you want to help us pick what to read next--

Andi: Go to our Goodreads.

Jarrah: Yeah, we have a Goodreads book club. So, if you go on Goodreads, it's under their groups. You can search. We hope you'll come join us. You can help us discuss this book if you haven't yet and/or you can give us your suggestions for future books. We're particularly looking for novels that are standalone novels, preferably about *TOS*, *TNG* or early *Deep Space Nine*. So, we're not spoiling things for Andi. [Sue laughs]

Andi: Yeah, I am going to try and put in a big plug for reading the Liviana Charvanek novels, because we all know how much I adore her. But please come and give us some suggestions, because I think it's really fun to discuss these all as a group.

Jarrah: Hi, folks. Just wanted to let you know that Women at Warp is now on Patreon. So, if you've been enjoying our show and you'd like to help us do things like offset our costs for hosting, upgrade our equipment, and most importantly, get our *Star Trek* feminist analysis out to more fans, please head over to patreon.com/womenatwarp to pledge your support. Even a dollar or two a month gets you access to exclusive online bonus content. Again, if you are interested and able to support us, please head over to patreon.com/womenatwarp

Andi: Oh, so, that was our first book club. That was really fun, guys. Thanks.

Jarrah: Hay.

Sue: Hay.

Andi: So, Jarrah, why don't you tell people where you can be found elsewhere on the Internet?

Jarrah: Thanks. You can find me at trekkiefeminist.tumblr.com. And I'm also on Twitter, [@jarrahpenguin](https://twitter.com/jarrahpenguin). That's J-A-R-R-A-H Penguin.

Andi: And how about you, Sue?

Sue: Sure. You can find more from me blogs and podcasts over at anomalypodcast.com. A-N-O-M-A-L-Y podcast dotcom.

Andi: And I'm Andi. You can follow my live tweeting of *Star Trek*. I am on *Deep Space Nine*, woo. over at Twitter, [@firsttimetrek](https://twitter.com/firsttimetrek). And you can also find my archive project at firsttimetrek.tumblr.com. Thanks so much for listening.

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