

## ***Black Water Sister* Transcript**

Welcome to Reading the Rainbow, brought to you by the Dauphin County Library System. For the book curious looking for their next good LGBTQ+ read. Listen in as queer library staff discuss the Own Voice stories they've been reading.



Lisa: I'm Lisa, my pronouns are she and her.

Danielle: Hello! My name is Danielle, and my pronouns are she/her and they/them.

Annika: I am Annika, my pronouns are she/her, but if-- whatever pronouns you feel fit for me, feel free.

A: Today's episode is about *Black Water Sister*, by Zen Cho, which is a contemporary fantasy set in Malaysia. Our protagonist, Jess, has just moved from America to Malaysia, and is struggling both with coming out to her parents and the ghost of her dead grandmother, who is complicating Jess's life with her own unfinished business.

L: I was really excited to read this book. I'm drawn to stories that are multi-generational, and this one did not disappoint. I loved the character of Ah Ma. I loved how unexpected it was. I think I'm going to get into spoilers pretty much right away. Ah Ma comes into Jess's head in the first line of the book. To me, she seems pretty much standard grandmother. Meddling, grandma knows best. You know, she's a pretty tough character. And I was blown away but what happened when she finally got Sherng into the temple.

A: Yes.

L: I was absolutely not expecting her to try and commit murder.

A: Yeah, not your typical grandma gesture there.

L: No.

A: (Laughs)

L: But it absolutely fit her character, because the more you get to know her, she becomes a very real character, and you recognize that she's driven by her maternal instinct, yes, protecting herself and protecting her family, but also, you know, she's more than just a mother, and she has this burning hate for Ng Chi Hin that has lasted beyond death.

D: I for one, I was really excited about reading this book. I always love LGBTQ reads that have more of a cultural aspect, as a BIPOC myself. And I especially love it when they had in more of a mystical twist, and I just love all the mystical aspects of this and the myths and urban legends involved in this story and the characters are really well developed

A: Absolutely, yeah. I also enjoyed that it was a fantasy that as not set in a more of a US-type of atmosphere; it wasn't in New York, it wasn't in San Francisco, you find a lot of books that are set within the US, and it was really exciting to see one that was set somewhere else. Because, strangely, people live there, too.

(Laughs)

A: Yeah, right.

L: And I thought that the author did a fantastic job of evoking the place.

A: Oh, my goodness, yes, like, even if it hadn't been super hot when I was reading that book, I feel like I would have been super hot.

L: I could really picture the city very clearly, and you know, she using the word hawker center? No idea what that is, but could pick it up easily from context, you know, the kind of you know, commercial sort of I guess street market kind of place that she was in. And actually did a good job with a lot of the local terms and language and just incorporating it very seamlessly into the novel and didn't have to stop and explain what it all meant.

A: Right. I had read an article that someone had said that they had to kind of guess sometimes but having listened to the audiobook rather than reading it, it just felt even more seamless. Because the reader just went right over the words, it didn't feel out of place, and you just were like, "Oh, that's what that means. Okay, cool." (laughs)

D: Yeah, Zen Cho was definitely very descriptive. And when she got to the food part and describing the food I was like "I'm definitely into this book." (laughs)

A: Oh, my goodness, yes. I spent a lot of time hungry. (Laughs) I actually went out and bought the chocolate drink from the book just because I'm like "She's drinking it all the time, it's gotta be good" and it is.

D: Yes, it defiantly is. (laughs)

L: You've had it as well?

D: Yes.

L: Oh, okay. I had never heard of it, but I must try it.

D: Do you recognize any similarities between the black water sister, Ah Ma, and Jess?

L: Well, there's definitely—oh sorry Annika.

A: No, go for it.

L: I mean, the story of Ah Ma and black water sister are, I think, very very similar. You know, starting from the fact that they both come from a rubber tapping-- both have that as part of their lives, and then they had the aggressive or abusive partner. Black water sister was ultimately killed by her partner which is what caused her rage and what caused her to become a hungry ghost, and it was very similar with Ah Ma that it was her partner-- even though they hadn't been together for decades-- who caused this anger and hatred in her that caused her to dwell and to possess Jess. I see much less of it in Jess except that she could go that way. She's kind of an empty vessel in a sense; her story hasn't started yet.

A: Right. Yeah, I saw that, too. And, yeah, you did point out that both Ah Ma and the black water sister, their lives went beyond death because of what had been done to them. So, that was definitely

interesting. But, the other aspect is that I kind of wondered, based on the visions that, uh, Ah Ma gave to Jess, I wondered if she has possibly been a closeted lesbian as well. Not so much the black water sister, because she does say that she loved the gentleman who killed her. Gentleman is too nice a word for him, but uh the guy (laughs) who killed her. But, I felt like there were a lot of context clues within what Ah Ma said: she never wanted children, she didn't necessarily like it when her partners touched her, that perhaps she just didn't know the word lesbian or how to be anything other than straight in her society. And perhaps that was something that drew her more to Jess than any of the other grandkids, because there was that tie there.

L: Yeah, I hadn't thought of that.

D: Yeah, I was going to say although that Jess didn't have as drastic a life as black water sister or Ah Ma, you definitely see her life becoming more and more complicated in terms of her not finding a job, her being stuck with her parents in her house in Malaysia where she hasn't visited a lot. And she's also having that conflicting relationship with her partner, and you can definitely see how they all intertwine.

A: Yeah. There's also this sort of control aspect. And each of the characters are allowing other people to control their lives and their outcomes, and that that ties in with Jess, too, because she's allowing her family to control her expression of herself, and as the book goes on, while she does start as sort of an empty vessel, ironically-- because she gets filled with grandma-- but by the end she's making her own choices and she's not—she's not being controlled anymore, and that's when her life gets better. So, I feel like what ties them together also is that control aspect, that they are not in control of their own lives, and throughout the story that the other women are teaching her how to control what happens to her.

L: Yeah. Um. Jess uses the word, I think *guai* to describe herself. Meaning a good girl, one who behaves and does what their parents say, and she's always done that. She's always felt the pressure to be good because of her father's cancer diagnosis. She just doesn't want to rock the boat, she doesn't want to make life hard for her parents, they've suffered enough, etcetera, etcetera. And, to a certain extent, I think, Ah Ma and black water sister, you know, they had those expectations on them and they had to eventually break out of them as well, pretty violently

A: Yeah (laughs). Lucky for Jess, hers didn't have to be quite like that.

(Laughs)

L: But she does have that very violent scene at the end of the book

A: That is very true. That is very true, I think I blocked a little bit of that from my memory. (Laughs) But yeah.

L: It was pretty rough. Yes. I think that was kind of a vital scene for her to have those experiences and somewhat put her in a context where could realize like, "This isn't the life I have to have. I don't have to have this life that my grandma had, that the black water sister had, I have a lot more potential to be different."

A: Absolutely, yep

D: I think that also ties in with Jess seeing herself as a good girl, and with being gay seen as dirty in that culture. She definitely did not want to come out and be seen as dirty or harm any of her family's feelings, and you can definitely see that develop throughout the book.

A: Yeah, absolutely.

L: I mean, she's kind of forced to disrupt her family's expectations in a lot of ways, maybe realized that, well, they can survive it, they can get through that and hopefully come out the other side strong.

A: Yeah. The support she got while she was trying to get Ah Ma out of her, and get past the black water sister, I feel like that helped her along too, because she's like, "Well, okay, if you're going to accept that there's a spirit in me, and Auntie who is Christian doesn't necessarily believe it, but she's still going to support me, maybe there's other things I'm not giving them the chance to support me in, too." (Laughs)

L: Yes, I loved that scene where her mother and aunt were arguing over the best way to get rid of the spirit. And you know, Auntie Coco?

A: Yeah.

D: Yeah.

L: Uh, was you know praying to Jesus, talking about getting a priest and doing an exorcism, it played very well.

A: It did. It really amused me when Jess is like having this like really intense conversation with the black water sister in the back garden. And like right as she's done, Auntie runs out and says, "In the name of Jesus, you must leave!" and Auntie's like "Absolutely, that's what made her go away! Yes, yes!" I found that funny, too. (Laughs) Even though, you know, maybe it was the intense conversation that she wasn't paying attention to. (Laughs)

L: I guess in the end there isn't a whole lot that her family is able to do to be able to help her, but just their support meant a lot to her.

A: Right, because even the family that she never met before, her uncle, her grandmother's son, that's a complicated way of saying uncle, anyway (laughs) he supports her right out of the box, too, and she's never even met him, so that probably helped a lot.

D: I loved how that scene shows that the family is starting to become more close knit, even if they were arguing about their religions to begin with. As time goes on, when Jess is fighting the black water sister and trying to get through the obstacle herself, her aunt and her mom and her uncle and everyone else is right there with her along the way.

A: So, how do we feel about the way that things were portrayed in this book, and how much did Jess's being a lesbian play into the story itself? I, at first, kind of felt like maybe the queer element was incidental, because it wasn't discussed a whole lot. Sure, she was having some problems with coming out to her parents, and she was having problems with her girlfriend because her girlfriend was ready for her to be out, and she wasn't. But that sort of felt like sort of a side arch. But by the end, it was quite apparent to me that the whole ordeal she went through was important in that she learned that she is allowed to be herself and the lesbian part of her isn't dirty and that she is allowed to say who she is, and she doesn't have to listen to what other people say and worry about what other people say. So, it feels

like the end culminated just the fact that the book ends with her saying that she's ready to come out, it feels like it goes from incidental to "Oh, this is what the whole book was about." (laughs)

D: And I think that ties in really well with the books starting with her grandmother asking her "Are you a *pengkid*?" I think that's how you say it. And at the end of the book, you see her saying, "Yes, I should finally come out." Because at the beginning, she definitely was ashamed of it, and her Ah Ma definitely played into that and teased her about it in the beginning. But yes, it definitely played out well.

A: Yeah, and having that question being the first thing, I feel like that establishes early exactly why Jess is so adamantly against coming out, because a lot of time, today coming out isn't as big of a deal as it was like when we were kids, but for her it is a big deal, because society at large sees it as being dirty and bad. Her mother didn't even want to tell her what it meant. So, it just goes to show in that society, it's just not really something that's acceptable.

L: There was a lot of interplay between, you know, her queerness and her possession. Um, like, the fact that, you know, she asks her mother "What does *pengkid* mean?" And she uses all this sort of round about language and won't say it, and the exact same thing happens when she's asking questions about spirits. "Well, what's the difference between a spirit and a god and a hungry ghost?" And, you know the euphemism to call her "a sister" and all these words that they use to never say "ghost" or whatever it is. And again, in the possession and we're going to use Jesus to get to possession out of you. We're going to fix you and make you clean again. So, while I also sort of felt like it was incidental, it's actually, when I reflect on it, woven pretty neatly into the story, and how she learns to kind of deal with both of them and how to shape a life with this aspect of herself

A: I totally missed that, and I love that you caught that, because that's awesome. (Laughs)



A: That wraps up our discussion about *Black Water Sister* by Zen Cho. Join us next episode as we discuss *Cemetery Boys* by Aiden Thomas.



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