

The Low, Low Woods 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.



Ashley: I'm Ashley, my pronouns are she/her, they/them.

Orin: Hi, my name is Orin and my pronouns are they/them.

Trista: Hello, my name is Trista, and my pronouns are she/her, they/them.

A: So, this week we're discussing *The Low, Low Woods*, written by Carmen Maria Machado and illustrated by DaNi. This is Carmen's debut limited-run comic series published by Hill House, which is part of DC Comics. *The Low, Low Woods* is a graphic novel that consists of six issues. It's a queer horror story, and in an interview Carmen classifies it as Pennsylvania Gothic. Carmen herself is from Eastern Pennsylvania, but was drawn to the landscapes and small mining towns of Central Pennsylvania for this story. Before we jump in too deep into this, I did want to give like a quick content warning for our listeners, just that it is a horror graphic novel. So, there's violence, there's a little bit of gore, and there is insinuation of sexual assault as well.

O: Shudder-to-Think, Pennsylvania, is plagued by a mysterious illness that eats away at the memories of those affected by it. El and Octavia are two best friends who find themselves the newest victims of this disease after waking up in a movie theater with no memory of the past few hours. As El and Vee dive deeper into the mystery behind their lost memories, they realize the stories of their town hold more dark truth than they could've imagined. It's up to El and Vee to keep their town from falling apart...to keep the world safe from Shudder-to-Think's monsters.

A: Yeah, so to be honest, this is the first horror graphic novel that I've ever read. So, it was kind of a lot to take in. And sometimes I was just thinking like, am I fully understanding what's happening? Am I supposed to fully understand what's happening? But I don't know, I was curious what your experience was, Tristan, Orin, and was it similar to my struggle?

T: At the beginning, I definitely think the storytelling was set up a little bit slow. So it was harder to understand, like they were already putting in a lot of subtext and innuendos that couldn't really be picked up until you got the context later in the story. So I can relate.

O: Yeah, I definitely think it's a book that kind of asks you to re-read it at least once. And I think each time you re-read it, I think you're going to get a little bit more out of it, for sure. I do read, I definitely like kind of more like horror and like the weird, like as a genre and like body horror and stuff like that. So this was definitely like right up my alley. So I like totally loved it. But yeah, I definitely like, going back and re-reading it was really cool because I got to like, really pick up on a lot of those things that they put in from the beginning that you wouldn't necessarily understand until you had the full context, which I thought was interesting.

A: Oh, maybe that was my mistake then. I didn't re-read it. I think I'm going to have to go back and do that. I mean, the first read through I really enjoyed once I got into it and got the hang of what was happening. But yeah, that's a good idea. I think I'll try that.

O: I think one thing that really stood out to me while reading was the actual setting of the story. As someone who's, you know, born and raised in Pennsylvania, I think I knew within like the first chapter or two, I was like, this author has to have been from Pennsylvania. I don't know what it was, but I just like immediately got that vibe. Like I knew because, you know, it says it's set in Pennsylvania. But like reading it, I was like, this author is from Pennsylvania. There's no way.

I don't know what it was. But like, I thought that was really impressive to me that they kind of managed to capture that setting so well. But it came through that strongly, I think.

A: Yeah. And I read an interview that she's from eastern PA. So out near Philly. And this is, you know, more set in central PA, more rural. She mentions Centralia quite often, which is like an hour north from where we are in Dauphin County. And I don't know if either of you are familiar with it, but it's like, it was a coal mining town, but it is essentially abandoned. I think there are like five people left living there. And once they pass, like no one else is allowed to live there because the coal mines underneath are literally on fire. And so it's a creepy old abandoned town. And even though, you know, she's not from, you know, north central, rural Pennsylvania, I had the similar feeling, Orin. Like just the vibes that you get from the characters and their discussions, like how El and Vee talk about college and that kind of struggle. And I think that's something that people can experience anywhere. But yeah, I can't put my finger on it. But I also got that feeling too, that she's definitely from Pennsylvania.

O: Yeah, that's interesting. Cause like, if I had to describe it, I don't know what it is. Cause like you said, there's nothing about it that's super like specific or anything like that. It's all stuff that I think most people could relate to. But yeah, there's something reading it that just felt very like recognizable.

T: I don't know if I would have necessarily understood that it was in Pennsylvania to begin with. I mean, I definitely picked up on the rural mountain-town kind of vibes, but it wasn't. So yeah, I mean, Pennsylvania. I'm from a rural town in Pennsylvania. So I can definitely relate with those vibes a lot. Like most of the time, if you're out at night, like they are several times in the comic, there's no one else around. It's a very private and intimate setting. And I think in the context of the horror story, that really set the mood for a lot of things that happened because it's really only them two against, you know, the forces that they're facing. And it was a good opportunity to explore their relationship on an intimate level.

O: Yeah, I agree. And I really liked that it was a friendship that was at the center of the story. There's definitely other relationships going on, but I really liked the friendship between El and Vee and that it feels so genuine, you know what I mean? They feel like people that are friends and were friends before the story opened, and will continue to have that relationship after the book is over. I really liked that.

A: Yeah, I was really impressed with both the writing and the illustration of their friendship. And, you know, it's only six issues. And so, you could definitely sit down and read it all in one sitting. But you do get a very strong sense of their friendship and even a bit of their history and, you know, arguments that they've gotten into and how they always come back to each other and have like that kind of magnetic pull towards one another. And yeah, I just, I always love when stories focus on like a really strong friendship rather than, you know, a romance, which are okay too. But yeah, I just, I really like that as it contrasted with all the disturbing things that were going on in their town.

T: I definitely think that, you know, romance plays an important role in a lot of stories as well. But I think I'd have to agree with you that I enjoyed the fact that they were friends, but they still had this intimate close relationship. And the fact that they were both lesbians as well, but still maintain the fact that they were just friends, you know, is good representation. And it shows that not every relationship you have, even if you are attracted to the same sex, has to go down a romantic route in order for it to be a meaningful and a connective relationship.

A: Yeah, that's a good insight. I feel like that's a fairly common theme, not necessarily in Own-Voice stories, but in stories where an author includes queer friends, they'll end up together, you know, in the end. And yeah, that's not really realistic, you know, not all the time anyway. I'm curious what you all thought of DaNi's art style. We talked about the plot and everything a little bit, but especially since

DaNi is an artist from Greece. And so this is totally new landscape and also like a culture. So this takes place in, I think the 90s, right?

O: I think so, yeah. I think I read an interview where, you know, she was kind of talking about how it was like a learning experience for her to kind of, you know, learn this whole like new time period and culture and everything. Because of course, like the 90s here were very different than, you know, the 90s in Greece and things like that. And just that the author, you know, sent her a lot of reference photos and stuff like that. But I thought generally, like, I think she did a really good job. And I think her style in general, I think works really, really well with the tone of the story. It has that sort of like, you know, really dark kind of, I don't know anything about art, but, you know, it's got this really great darkness to it, but it doesn't get too like lost in that. It has like kind of a looseness to it, but I don't think it, you know, gets too like messy. Sometimes I see that in graphic novels. Sometimes the art will have like, it's not detailed, but sometimes it almost feels too messy and it's hard to tell kind of what's going on. And I don't think this had that. I thought it worked really well.

T: I'd have to agree. I think the art style is pretty neat and clean to understand. I also really enjoyed their use of color in it. There's tons of gradients and they did a great job at choosing colors that would blend well together and set the mood for the particular scene that is going on. I definitely noticed that during some of that, the happier scenes that they tend to use more greens and yellows, which, you know, just displays the mood that's going on at the time. And during some of the scenes where it's darker and sad or even, you know, some of the angry settings, they use lots of blues and reds to communicate that as well.

A: Yeah, I kind of picked up on that too. And I feel like we need to give credit to the colorist as well, Tamara Bonvillain for that. I didn't notice it as I was reading it, but it definitely affected how I responded emotionally. And then flipping through and, you know, after reading it and thinking about the artwork a little bit more, I kind of realized that and I thought it was very cleverly done. And yeah, the art style is loose at times. Like a lot of times there's just like incredible detail and other times, you know, things become scribbles. And I think that just kind of gives it not like a, I don't want to say dreamlike state, but, you know, the opening scene, they're in a, Vee and El are in a movie theater and they wake up having fallen asleep and not knowing what happened, but realizing that something happened, you know, and kind of in that foggy mindset. And I feel like the art style kind of helps carry that through the story as they're trying to figure out what the heck is going on in their town. I thought it was really interesting. I know some people might not enjoy that art style, but I think it fits really well with Carmen's story.

T: Which I think that's a style that a lot of people who do graphic novels or manga end up doing, where some scenes are more detailed than others, because it definitely saves time whenever you're doing art. But I feel like in this particular graphic novel, back to what Ashley was saying, where they used it, you know, in a more clever way to kind of create the illusion of being in that dreamlike state and having the more detailed scenes set for whenever the characters are more hyper-aware of the situations that are going on.

A: So earlier we mentioned that this is a limited-run series, right, there's only six issues. And so it's a fast read and there's a lot that happens. And I feel like you find out a lot right at the end. So how did you feel about that? Did you like the pacing or did you kind of wish that there was, you know, more pages for them to kind of explain everything and draw it out more?

T: I don't really feel like the story needed to be drawn out any more than it already was. You know, sometimes there's a finite amount of story and it's okay to end where you did. Drawing it out can often tend, at least in my experience with reading, tend to lead to boredom or, you know, giving up on reading the thing altogether. But I feel like the pacing and the way that it was set kept me interested the entire time that I was reading. And at the end, whenever they did give you the information, I wasn't left wanting more. Like, I feel like they summed it up in the six issues that they released pretty well. It didn't really need any more to it.

O: Yeah, I agree. It seems pretty clear that, you know, Carmen had kind of a story in mind that knew the beginning and the ending of it. And the story reflects that, I think. You know what I mean? I think if you were to try and stretch it out too much, it would kind of fall apart.

T: Not to mention, you know, the pacing at the beginning is already, you know, kind of slow to set up the mysterious plot line. If they were to drag it out even more, the problems with, you know, becoming bored reading the story might have, you know, been even worse.

A: Yeah, that's a good point. And I feel like the pacing kind of fits because at first I was like, oh, this is kind of slow to get into. Like, when is, you know, something going to happen and speed it up? But you think about the setting and what's taking place. It's a rundown town. Things are kind of slow anyway. And it's a coming-of-age story. So these two friends are getting ready to graduate and thinking about what they're going to do next, which also kind of feels like a dragged-out process when you're, you know, that age and getting ready for that jump. And then, you know, suddenly they figure out what's happening, kind of. And so I think it makes sense for it to start out slow and then like have all of this information right at the end. Yeah, at first I wasn't sure how I liked it, but I think it was really well thought-out and makes a lot of sense connecting to the plot itself.

T: Thinking about the overall arc of the story and the way that it's done now that we've had some time to discuss it, I feel like it kind of relates with how people remember things that were traumatic to them anyway, where things are kind of fuzzy. It's like, you know, something happened, but you're not exactly sure. So you sit down and you try and think about it and you try and work through it. But then there's like this huge rush of, you know, all the memories that come racing back. You get, your brain gets a huge information dump whenever you're having flashbacks. And I think that was, you know, something very clever for the author to do, given the traumatic plotline of the story.

T: Yeah, Trista, that's a really good connection that you just made.

T: Without giving away too much of the story, the themes of, I mean, kind of going back to what I was saying before about, you know, the themes of trauma and how we deal with it. It's like some people, you know, just want to forget the things that happened to them. And some people want to live through it and experience that. And I feel like the emphasis that they put on that both ways of coping are valid was a really important message to people who have been through situations that the characters had been through in the book. And there's no right way to cope. As long as you're coping in a way that isn't affecting others around you, you should be able to make the choice for yourself.

A: Yeah, I think the author and the artist both put a lot of care into, you know, getting that message across. I mean, there are several spreads in which they show, you know, people in the town making that decision for themselves. You know, whether they're in a room by themselves making that choice, or if they're with family or friends or loved ones for supporting them through that decision. I don't think there were really any words tied into that. I think it was mostly imagery with some narration from one of the protagonists. Yeah, that was really powerful. And I was very glad that that happened because when you find out what's going on in the town and this trauma that people are coming to terms with or deciding whether or not they want to come to terms with, I had to put the book down and walk away for a little bit because it was just like, it was just a lot for me. I don't know what I was expecting. Then sitting back down and, you know, having that scene played out, it really helped me, you know, finish the book and think like, oh yeah, I enjoyed that. Like that was a good book. I think that was really important for me personally to have that kind of tie things up at the end. Orin, do you have any last thoughts?

O: I think for all of its kind of, you know, weirdness and stuff like that, it's actually in a lot of ways a fairly, you know, grounded story. Like when it comes down to it, you know, like you said, it's a story about trauma and I think generational trauma especially. And like that, it's, you know, it's layered in metaphors, I think, but I appreciated the realism of it.

T: One last thing in the book that I noticed that I wanted to address is the figure of the deer character. I'm not sure if they were going for it intentionally, but there are, you know, I don't want to say folklore, I don't think that's exactly what it is, but, you know, myths about deer-shaped characters in wooded, heavily wooded areas and rural areas. And these figures basically feed on like, you know, the discourse and disharmony of, you know, other people. And the fact that, you know, they're using one in this particular context and it shows up so many times, especially, you know, during areas of conflict. And it was just, you know, a good piece of storytelling. And everybody who knows the type of creature that it's based off of, I don't like to say it because I'm a bit superstitious, but having it in this particular story was, you know, a fantastic piece of storytelling, I think on their part.

A: Yeah, definitely. So listeners, if you are looking for a creepy, kind of weird, horror graphic novel that is centered on friendship and kind of working together to figure out a mystery, then this book might be for you. I think it's pretty clear that we all enjoyed it. So, yeah.

T: That wraps up our discussion about *The Low, Low Woods* created by Carmen Maria Macado and DaNi. Join us the next episode as we cover *She Walks for Days Inside a Thousand Eyes* by Sharon Proulx-Turner.



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