

Light One Candle 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.



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

Emily: Hi, my name is Emily and my pronouns are they/them. In this episode, we will be discussing *Light One Candle* by Keelan Ellis. In *Light One Candle*, nerdy, struggling graphic novelist Josh Reben expected to work at his comic book store job all through the holidays. The only thing he had to look forward to was a possible hookup with a guy who—let's be honest—didn't seem that into him. So when his brother Ben calls to tell him he'll be flying home for Hanukkah, along with his wife and new baby, Josh pleads for the day off for a family visit. With the best of intentions, Ben also invites their former neighbor Marc Birnbaum to dinner. Only, he didn't know that Marc bullied Josh for years when they were children. Josh approaches the evening with the idea of getting some closure, but when he finds Marc to be completely changed from his childhood self, things get a little confusing. Family drama and personal baggage make for holiday tensions, but during the Festival of Lights, the Rebens and their guest just might find their way to some new understandings. We just want to make a note too that the books that we usually review and read on this podcast are confirmed own-voiced stories. So they're written from the perspective of someone who belongs to the community that they are writing about. In this particular case, we weren't able to confirm whether Keelan Ellis identifies as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. So just want to make that known. Certainly something to keep in mind when reading books about queer people, or a marginalized group in general. It's very important to think about who is creating this story, and what is their actual perspective, and what might their motivations be. We have this snapshot of a moment in these two men's lives, but for what it is, being like cutesy, holiday, feel-good, queer, romance. I mean, it was cute.

O: Yeah. Yeah. I feel like we are really digging into it more than it very clearly was meant to be dug into or analyzed. It was not built for this. But I mean, I still think it's interesting to look at it in a more realistic light. It's very clearly not. It's a hallmark movie. It's a lifetime movie. And it is cute. It is very sweet. I always like seeing holidays beside Christmas as well. I mean, it's kind of a small portion of it, but I mean, there's something to be said for that too.

E: It felt a little too tidy to me. Josh was extremely willing to forgive behavior that he described to be pretty traumatic, right? And he seemed to, and quite clearly, Mark had obviously changed. He was very apologetic for his aggressive behavior towards Josh in the past. But I don't know, it felt very one-dimensional in the sense that clearly Josh, I mean, he talked to Ben about being nervous about Marc coming to dinner, but he was just concerned with how cute Marc had gotten was one of the first things. It talks about his anxieties a little bit, I think. But again, because it is so short and sweet, I think that we don't necessarily get the most realistic confrontation. I feel like I would have been far more scared to have my childhood bully at my family holiday dinner. That just, I don't know, it seems like he was pretty okay with what seemed to be a very traumatizing, triggering experience, potentially.

O: Yeah, no, I totally agree. I thought, and I mean, it seems pretty obvious that the author was not going for a super deep story. It was definitely meant to be more surface level and sweet. And so, I mean, that's what it is. So, I hesitate to kind of ding it too much for that.

E: Sure. We don't get really anything from Marc's perspective throughout the entire time, but we see this person that he changed into. He's a high school bully to openly gay child psychologist in an underfunded school district.

O: I'd like to think it works like that. It reminded me of when I was young and there was somebody bullying me, and my parents would tell me, oh, they have a hard time at home, so they make other people feel bad. And yeah, I'm sure that's probably definitely a part of it a lot of the time, but this made it feel a little oversimplified, I guess. I liked the character just kind of as he was. I did think he was endearing, and I liked him. He seemed very sweet.

E: Yeah, I definitely agree with you there. I think too I was almost frustrated that Marc seemed to be in a better place with his life and career than Josh felt like he was, right? Like Josh is this struggling graphic novelist. He works retail at a comic book store. He explains that even though he's published a couple of stories, things haven't taken off quite like he wants them to. And meanwhile, you know, Marc has his doctorate, who by the way, this part for me was very, as an artist and feeling so connected to my sketchbook, if somebody had put my sketchbook in a toilet the way Marc is described to having done to Josh, I would be devastated, legitimately devastated. I think that sketchbooks are such a personal, like, I have mine with me all the time, right? And so again, like something that Josh clearly cares very much about, right? He's not succeeding with in his life, at least not to the level that he wants to be and his childhood bully, who actively clearly picked on him for this thing. Not only is this nice, cute, potential romantic interest, but he's also doing better. And that was frustrating for me a little bit. That was probably one of the most realistic things about this.

O: Yeah, yeah, no, I totally agree with that. And as for the sketchbook, I want to mention one other moment too. In the present day in the story, when he when he first comes over, I think he immediately goes and like sits down on the couch and starts flipping through his sketchbook that's sitting there. And I was immediately like, so uncomfortable by that, because I'm like, I don't even draw, but like, don't do that. Please don't do that.

E: That's another thing that like, as an artist with a connection to your sketchbook, it is uncomfortable when people just start flipping through it. Like you don't, that's not, like for anyone to see just because it's there. Especially like Marc being a psychologist, a child psychologist, I feel like he should have the knowledge and the respect to know that that's not something he should just do. Also with the knowledge that he bullied Josh for art in the past, right? Like it just seems very, the whole the whole scenario is like too good to be true, honestly. I'm sure cutie things happen like this in real life. But again, it all just seemed like very clean-cut. People didn't really seem as upset as they would be about the past. It seemed to that Marc was holding on to it a lot more than Josh was at that point. They talk about that in the book. At some point, Josh says to Marc it's not just me who has to let this go. You also have to let it go. Like Marc, I feel like I haven't been fair to him in this discussion because he does express remorse, right? Like he does apologize very profusely, wants to treat Josh to a nice meal and really dissect this, but...

O: I definitely feel very similarly. I mean, I just can't imagine somebody who bullied me so much. I think even tried to, you know, apologize and come back into my life. It's one thing to kind of like understand where they're coming from and understand like, oh, wow. Yeah. Okay. He did have, you know, a rough childhood. I can understand that and maybe even forgive that. But I don't know how much of a relationship I could have with that person, especially if they like, you know, really hurt me, you know, made me, you know, afraid to go to school and things like that. Some part of me would, I think really always kind of feel that and be like, this person like really kind of like traumatized me, I think, you know what I mean? Really kind of hurt me. And I mean, even if you can and do want to get past that, that's a lot of work to do. And that's a lot of work to like carry into a, you know, kind of burgeoning relationship, whether it's a friendship or, you know, a romantic relationship or whatever, just a lot of baggage to go into kind of any relationship with. But yeah, I mean, like if I came home to my parents for a holiday and my brother like surprised me by inviting anyone.

E: Yeah.

O: I'm trying to just be comfortable with my family. Like, I don't want to have to like worry about someone I basically don't know.

E: That was another thing, like, from high school, I would be really uncomfortable with like anybody that I went to school with that I hadn't seen in like 10 years, let alone somebody that was mean to me.

O: Yeah. And I mean, yeah, I know his brother didn't know, but I mean, he seemed to know at least something. Cause it's like when Josh kind of explained a little bit, like, yeah, this guy kind of like tortured me. He says, well, I didn't know it was that bad. So like he knew something. I don't know, man. I just feel like his brother just kind of was like, it's fine. He's cute. I'm gonna invite him. I did not like that. That would make me personally so uncomfortable.

E: Well, and I would have been way more irritated at my sibling, especially if I had called off work like Josh did to, you know, to spend family time.

O: Yeah. Yeah. Cause I mean, he really sprung it on him. Not to mention like he kind of guilt tripped him to get them there in the first place.

E: Yeah. True.

O: Okay. Like you made me feel guilty to come and then all of a sudden, you're going to surprise me with someone, basically a stranger and especially someone I really don't want to see or even like have this confrontation with right now. Yeah. I'd be more than a little upset, I think.

E: Yeah. Maybe Josh is just really non-confrontational.

O: Yeah. It does definitely seem that way. And especially with his brother, he like refers to him as kind of the golden boy. So I guess I can kind of see that. And I think even in the narration, like we don't even get a his anger or anything like that, which is kind of surprising.

E: I wonder if Ben like invited Marc partially to, cause we have that issue of identity that is very briefly touched on like the Jewish identity and Ben and Christine have a new son who's, I think like six to eight months old. And they decided not to get the baby circumcised based on research that they've done. And obviously in the Jewish faith, that is a very controversial decision if you are a traditionally practicing Jewish person. And I thought that was, I kind of wish we had seen that conversation also. Like there are aspects of this that I wanted to know more about and it being so short certainly creates a very specific reading experience, right? I think that would have been a really interesting character development, both for Christine and for Rebecca.

O: Yeah. I feel like there was so much interesting character dynamics here that like could have been gone into and like would have been, you know, kind of more intriguing to read from a character perspective. And yeah, we just miss all of them. I mean, they, you know, our narrator is gone for the whole conversation about, you know, the baby being circumcised. And Josh just kind of says like, yeah, she'll get over it. That's what she does. It almost felt like ironic that he's just like, yeah, mom acts like it's a big deal. And then she just gets over it and it's nothing. It's kind of like, okay. What's the point then?

E: Her character is very much so that she's like, the mom in this story, right? Because at the one point they're sitting at dinner and Marc reveals like very casually and conversationally that he has come out as gay since high school. And the mom interrupts, Rebecca interrupts the conversation and says, oh, did you know Josh is gay? Which I thought was really silly, like very classic, wrong place, wrong time. And like the whole dinner seems like the setup for Marc and Josh. And maybe, you know, Marc's circumstances made Rebecca a little more willing to have this third party at their holiday dinner. But yeah, it seemed like the whole, it was just very like conniving sibling, mother, like trying to set up Josh. I don't know. It's just all of it, it's a little silly, but I guess it is very much in like the holiday genre of romance stories in that way.

O: You know, it does feel very in that genre. I think that's, you know, kind of a cliché of the genres that, you know, the holidays are like when romance happens and your parents are kind of pushing this on you and like stuff like that. Just holding the baby, and the mom like makes a comment about, you know, how he looks very like comfortable with the baby and even kind of says like, yeah, you're not off the hook for this teasing just because you're gay. Like, yeah, actually times have changed. Gay people can have babies too. I'm still going to tease you about it. I'm still going to push you on it.

E: Yeah.

O: Which like, I like in a lighthearted way. Yeah, it's kind of funny. But I think also it does definitely play into that too, where it's like, no, you're not escaping. I'm still going to like pressure you to have babies.

E: Yeah. I wish that maybe we would have seen some sort of recognition from Rebecca that Marc had been bullying Josh. Because even if Ben didn't know, I feel like as the mom, unless Josh was just like very quiet and kept very quiet about it, that maybe his mom would have known. But then again, maybe if he didn't tell his brother, he probably didn't tell his mom. I wish we had gotten like boyhood-Josh perspective, right? Or boyhood-Marc perspective, instead of just this one moment in time. It seems like this was a cute vignette that Keelan wanted to write. And it came across, but it definitely left me wanting more. And that could be a product of quippy writing. It was fun to read. In other short stories I've read, there can be room and space for very dynamic scenes, intense character development that has you a lot more connected to the characters and describes, again, more realistic confrontations and more dynamic, you know, thought processes. If you're looking for a very cute, short, happy, good-feeling, kind of anticipatory, like the end is left very open-ended, you can imagine like a sweet future for these two, then this is perfect for you.

O: Yeah. But yeah, I think to really like fully enjoy it, you do kind of have to know that you're going in. There's not a whole lot of depth there. And that's not to knock that at all. Like you said, I think that's totally valid too. I think you need lighter stuff. This was definitely a nice way to kind of pass the time and read a cute little story. That wraps up our discussion about *Light One Candle* by Keelan Ellis and concludes season one of Reading the Rainbow. We'll see you again in 2022 for season two.



This has been Reading the Rainbow, a Dauphin County Library System podcast for books by and about the LGBTQ+ community. If you enjoyed this podcast, please follow us for new book discussions. And if you're interested in this episode's selection, consider borrowing from your local library. Thanks for listening!