

Under the Whispering Door 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, and they/them.

Lizzie: I'm Lizzie, my pronouns are she/her.

Anne: And I'm Anne, and my pronouns are she/her, they/them.

Ashley: This week we're discussing *Under the Whispering Door*, a queer contemporary fantasy written by T.J. Klune. T.J. Klune is a Lambda Literary award-winning author of *Into the River I Drown*, and an ex claim examiner for an insurance company. His novels include the Green Creek series, *The House on the Cerulean Sea*, and *The Extraordinaries*. *The House on the Cerulean Sea* is a New York Times and USA bestseller, and *Under the Whispering Door* is a New York Times, USA Today, and Indie bestseller. Being queer himself, T.J. believes that it's important, now more than ever, to have accurate, positive queer representation in stories. Just a quick content warning for this book, T.J. Klune discusses topics of loss and grief. At the start of the book, the author notes, "this story explores life and love as well as loss and grief. There are discussions of death in different forms, quiet, unexpected, and death by suicide. Please read with care."

Anne: When a reaper comes to collect Wallace Price from his own funeral, Wallace suspects he really might be dead. Instead of leading him directly to the afterlife, the reaper takes him to a small village. On the outskirts, off the path, through the woods, tucked between mountains, is a particular tea shop run by a man named Hugo. Hugo is the tea shop's owner to locals, and the ferryman to souls who need to cross over. But Wallace isn't ready to abandon the life he barely lived. With Hugo's help, he finally starts to learn about all the things he missed in life. When the manager, a curious and powerful being, arrives at the tea shop and gives Wallace one week to cross over, Wallace sets about living a lifetime in seven days.

Ashley: I'm just curious about your thoughts in comparison to his other books and just your general thoughts about *Under the Whispering Door*.

Lizzie: I have not read any of T.J. Klune's other books, but when I told my best friend I was reading, she was like, Oh, T.J. Klune! So that was good. I really liked this book. It was, and I don't want to say juvenile, but it was like more, I guess, juvenile's not the word I want. It's the only word I can think of that I anticipated it was going to be, but like not in a bad way, but also like then it wasn't because sometimes there was cursing and like mentions of like S-E-X stuff, but it was cute. And I really, I did really like it. And the themes weren't juvenile. I did, I really did enjoy it. And I cried quite a few times at the end. I told myself I wasn't going to. When I cried the third time, I was like, I will not cry a fourth. And then I did. So it like kind of caught me off guard with that.

Anne: Yeah, I've read a few of T.J.'s books. I read *the Cerulean Sea*, *How to Be a Normal Person*, *Tales of Rhaenia*, and some of his Green Creek series too. His books are all very different, but I was surprised by how much of a jump there was between *Cerulean Sea* and this one in terms of how it compares. And I got the book autographed at a book signing, the one he did down in Maryland. And so all I can think about is him talking about the book where he was like, *Cerulean Sea*, you know, it's sort of like this dreamy escapist thing. But when you get to this one, it's like a warm hug. It's kind of like a bittersweet warm hug. So I was kind of prepared for that, in a way. But at the same time, I kept wanting to be like, OK, how does this relate to the other world? And it was just different. I really liked it.

Ashley: The first book of his that I've read was *The House on the Cerulean Sea*. Yeah, this one is very different. And then the author's note at the start kind of had me worried because I loved the just quirkiness of *House on the Cerulean Sea* so much and all the characters in it. And then at the beginning of this one, you know, giving the content warning about death and grief and to read with care. I honestly kept pushing this back like down my to-read list, because I didn't know if I was ready for it. Lizzie, you said Juvenile. I agree. I don't know what the best word to use is, but kind of like that where he's exploring these difficult, heavy topics, but in a way that is very warm, like a hug, like you said, Anne, and is pretty gentle in how it's explored. I really appreciated that. Yeah, generally, I enjoyed the book. I always enjoy his characters and his character development. Some of his characters just crack me up. I really enjoyed Nelson.

L: Yes, oh my God. Yeah.

Ashley: So I guess maybe just to give a little character map, the story follows Wallace Price, who is an ex-attorney who now finds himself having passed away and having to figure out how to move on. Then Hugo Freeman is the ferryman who's trying to help Wallace cross over. Nelson is Hugo's father, and he's just...

L: Grandfather.

Ashley: Oh, grandfather. Sorry, yes. He just likes to play pranks and is very, very funny.

L: Also dead.

Ashley: Also dead, yes. Apollo is the dog who's a very good boy. Also dead.

L: The best boy.

Ashley: And then there's May, who's the Reaper, who is like the first person that Wallace encounters after dying, and she kind of brings him to Hugo.

L: I felt it was a good character evolution. I mean, obviously he goes from being like this horrible, cold, heartless guy. Like his opening scene is him just heartlessly firing a woman and taking away her daughter's scholarship. And then obviously at the end, I mean, he's like totally transformed, kind, selfless person. Halfway through the book, I felt myself being like, how did we get here? He was just so easily so warm than, like, with everyone's intervention and everyone's influence. And he obviously, he didn't start that way. I mean like, and it wasn't instant either. Like he had a lot of coming to terms with it. It reminded me, this is where I'm going to mention *The Good Place*. It reminded me, I have a screen grab from *The Good Place*, the TV show, on my desk says, "the point is that people improve when they get external love and support. How can we hold it against them when they don't?" And that's kind of part of the theme of *The Good Place*. And I kind of feel like that's part of a theme of this and of Wallace's character arc is that like he didn't have a lot of chance and like he had a lot of like external influence, some onus on him, but also like there's this idea of like a lot of what happens to people externally influences who they are. And then the same thing happens to him in a positive way when he meets Hugo and Nelson and May and they give him patience and they give him time to explore himself and they give him external love and support. And he improves and he like finds those things in himself. And I really, really enjoyed that because it wasn't, it didn't come out of nowhere and it didn't come from nothing, his character development. It really, it felt organic and good. And yeah, I enjoyed that.

Anne: I feel like that was something that kind of tied it to *The Cerulean Sea* for me a little bit. I feel like in both books, they were sort of critiquing like how we view people. One of the things I thought was most interesting about Wallace was finding out that he had been like a good person all along, but he was doing what the world expected of him. I want to talk about his bisexuality because I thought

that was a very interesting thing. I don't think it's a spoiler, but you know that he was bisexual that he had, you know, a deep and loving relationship with a woman. But what I got was they were too young. They didn't know what they wanted. And now he has, in the afterlife, he had a chance to have a deep and loving relationship with a guy. And one of the things I like about TJ is I feel like he can present these things and be like, you know, I know that some people may make judgments, but this is two people who love each other. And they are better people together. And they're even better for the people that they interact with together. I was like, wow. Like that was just, that part of it just sort of floored me. I get the whole thing. Like he was not a bad guy. He was just like, like, isn't it what you want from me world? You want me to like be all about profits and not care about people, right? And like, once he got a chance to step back, he's like, no, I actually care about people. Why was I doing that? Why, you know, that character arc, I just...

Ashley: Yeah. And I wonder how much of that is influenced by the choice of settings that Clean Places Wallace. So during his life, Clean Places Wallace and, you know, his self-made law firm with his, with his partners, it's very fast-paced and he's interacting with people, of course, but it's through this very specific lens and like following different policies and procedures and things. So not really viewing people as people, which I think it comes across very well in the opening scene where, Lizzie mentioned, he's firing his employees in a very questionable way. It's not, it's not good. And it almost feels like a, like a joke. Like, I don't know. It's very exaggerated, but it kind of gets a point across of where he is in life. And then Charon's Crossing, which is the tea shop that Hugo runs where Wallace is spending his time preparing to cross over, is also a busy environment as a tea shop, as a business, but it's described as this very warm and cozy place. It's full of people who care about one another. And then I always think about that sign. And I think it comes pretty early on in the book when Wallace first enters Charon's Crossing for the first time. The chalkboard with the menu and everything, there's just a saying at the middle of it that says, "the first time you share tea, you are a stranger. The second time you share tea, you are an honored guest. And the third time you share tea, you become family." I felt like that really set the scene for, and like gave him the opportunity to just like do this 180 and just totally change how, kind of giving, not a second chance, but like giving him the space to become a better person. Just that environment and the people there. Earlier, Anne, you mentioned the queer representation in the book and the expectations that Wallace was trying to meet in life. And then, you know, the chance for a relationship with a man as he was crossing over. And there's a passage on page 136 and 137 where Hugo and Wallace are having just like one of their one-on-one conversations after the shop closes, where they both casually in conversation just add in like, oh, I'm gay. Oh, I'm bisexual. And like not asking one another, but like slipping that in just, oh, so casually to like, let one another know, like, oh, that's very, that's very real. And then just like from that point on, watching their friendship and like their romance grew between the two was just very sweet. When I was preparing for this, I wanted to, in the intro, call it a gay romance book or queer romance, but it's actually marketed as a queer fantasy. And like one of the sub-themes is romance. I don't know. That kind of surprised me.

L: I think that's interesting though, because like the romance wasn't, well, obviously it was a major theme. It wasn't the theme of the story. The theme was, Klune asks his readers, what will you do with the time you have left? And so like, that's kind of the theme. And then I guess like the answer to that for Hugo and Wallace was, we're going to fall in love. I think that's nice that it's not like that wasn't the focus of the book, but it also was like a nice undercurrent of how is this going to happen? How are they going to, because like obviously one of them is alive and one of them is dead and how are they going to reconcile this? They can't even touch each other. Like, how are they going to do that? Also, how do we make the, I'm dead and here's the afterlife and here's how to be a better person. And then, yeah. Can we talk about Cameron? He gives me so much feels. Cameron, dear listeners, is what is called a husk because he is like a person who has died and he was brought to the tea shop and he ran away from the tea shop. But because he is dead, he decomposes, I guess, and kind of loses his humanity. That whole scene where we see his life, that hit me, man. That hit me like a ton of bricks.

Anne: Yeah.

L: That was the first place I cried.

Anne: Yeah.

L: He gives me all the feels.

Anne: Yeah, I mean, yeah, I agree. I think this was probably more fantasy than romance just because of that and because of the world. I didn't even, like that was just, that was really deep. I really feel like it was a story about how everybody has a way that no matter how lost you may think you are, that there is a way that you can come back from that. And not only that, I think it was part of kind of the overall character arc, even of Hugo and how when people get together, they come up with ideas that you would have never thought about on your own. And it's like, wow, together we can do that.

Ashley: It's an example of like one of the ways that someone in the book experiences grief and how that affects their decisions moving forward and how you, like, heal from that and come back. And I feel like there are a number of characters in the book where you get to see that through their little side stories in the story, which I really enjoy where, you have the main group of characters of Wallace and Hugo and Nelson and May, but then you also have Cameron, and learning about his life that he lived and how that turned him into a husk before he could get the chance to cross over. And then you get to see someone who's still currently living, who lost someone, Nancy, who comes into the tea shop and Wallace gets to watch Hugo help her and try to overcome that grief or learn how to live with it. And even Naomi, I think with Wallace, Naomi was his ex-wife when he was living and it sounded like a very tumultuous relationship, very strange. And she's at his funeral at the beginning of the book and he's like, why isn't she crying? And is just like astounded by her behavior that she wasn't grieving the way he wanted her to, and seeing how they're able to reconnect before he gets ready to cross over, after he has died and communicating with one another is just, I just really appreciate that Klune explored those smaller characters and their stories that you don't always get to see in books and also just like the different ways people experience grief.

Anne: Yeah, that last moment with Naomi was just so like, it was just so like real, yeah, real. It was such a real conversation. It's just, I could totally picture it. Like I believe, a lot of it's fantastic but that part of my, I totally picture that conversation happening exactly that way and, because they're all good people, they're just figuring things out. And it was like, okay. Do we want to talk about Nancy at all? Like that whole situation? Cause that was like, that was heartbreaking, especially in the middle.

L: Yeah, that was heavy. I really liked that we got an ending for Nancy and we got a like, not a reconciliation but almost, like she got closure, I think. And I really enjoyed seeing that instead of just, I don't know, her sadness. I really felt it. Also, Nancy's my mom's name. Shout out, Nance.

Ashley: I think one thing that's important to note which I didn't realize when I read the book because I read it as an advanced reader copy. So I didn't get to read like, the interviews and all of the media leading up to the publication until after I had read it. But T.J. Klune talks about this a lot in interviews that he had done for, like, to celebrate the publication of this book. The inspiration of the book and what caused him to write this story is that he had lost someone that he loved that he was in a relationship with in the early 2010s. And it happened very fast. So I think they met in 2010 at a romance writers convention, and then married like two years later. And then within another few years he passed away very suddenly from an illness. And so, in an interview with the Nerd Daily, which is now my favorite online publication, just for the name, he says, when they questioned about what inspired him to write the story he says, "I lost someone I loved dearly a few years ago and it irrevocably changed me. I was mired in grief, angry at the unfairness of it all. Grief can be cathartic, but it also can be all-consuming. A fire that burns long and bright growing uncontrollably. It set me on a quest to understand what grief is and how it changes a person. *Under the Whispering Door* is my wish to the universe. My hope for what comes after we close our eyes for the last time. I don't set out to answer what comes next but only that there is something there waiting for us all." And so not knowing that when I read the book and knowing that now as I re-read it in preparation for this I think

it helped me pick out all the different moments of grief in the book and realize that he explores that with all of the characters in the book. And in a separate interview he says that he didn't write the book to like, heal from this loss that he personally experienced but it did like bring him a bit of peace. But I think you can see the, you know we were talking about Nancy, this character who is still living, who visits Charon's Crossing and, you know, Hugo is trying to help her with her grief in that quote that I recited, how grief can be all-consuming, a fire that burns long and bright. I think that fits very well with her character. So I don't, yeah, don't think I want to spoil her plot line but I think that's a good.

Anne: I feel like that's kind of part of what makes it a fantasy is I think in a lot of fantasy a lot of times it'll be like 10 different characters but you can tell they're in a way they're emotions that one person that all of us might feel kind of expressed in a story or a person. And I'm like, I feel in a way we all, sometimes we feel like Cameron and we're lost. And sometimes we all feel like Nancy and it's like, no, we, I don't care if it's hopeless, I have to try to find some way. And like everything in between. And I think that was that's part of what makes it relatable. And he's also said that Wallace was inspired by Scrooge from *A Christmas Carol*

L: That scans.

Ashley: It's just kind of made me well.

L: Another story about ghosts.

Anne: Except now he is the ghost.

Ashley: Right, because in *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge is still alive.

L: Correct.

Ashley: And is just like being shown how Scrooge he is by others. Whereas, Wallace is dead, and he can't really go back and make any changes to the decisions he had made in life.

L: Oh, how the turntables.

Anne: I've been holding on to this book for like a year. I had a signed copy and I couldn't bear to read it. And now I had to read it. And yeah, emotions, lots of feelings.

L: Yeah

Ashley: Yeah. It goes into heavy topics, but...

L: It does that so reverently too. Like it, it handles them so well. When I was reading some of the heavier scenes toward the end, I was like, wow, there should really be a warning for this. And then I was like, oh my God, there was, which is just so rare. I think this might have been the first book I've ever read with like a content warning from the author. And I really enjoyed that. Yeah, because otherwise it really just kind of could have been very triggering for some individuals. And my undergrad degree's in publishing, a few conversations during some classes, we were talking about content warnings and like ratings like we have for movies and games. Should we have those on books? I always advocated for at least some kind of content warning, for reasons like this. And so it was really just nice to see that. And he treated the characters and the content with such care. It was, yeah, it was really nice to read.

Ashley: Yeah. So I would say for people thinking about or wanting to read this, yeah, take care while reading it. Like, follow the author's note at the start of the book because there are some, yeah, very emotional things that happen, especially towards the end of the book as you're learning more about the backstories of certain characters and how things get tied up. And he makes you feel a lot of things,

but I think, and maybe this is because TJ Klune wrote this with his own loss in mind, he's able to wrap it up in a way where, you know, you still feel there's closure, which helps the people in the book kind of come to terms, accept. I'm glad I read it. I was a little scared having read the author's note, but I think he does a really good job at tackling those topics of loss and grief and healing. And I would recommend. That wraps up our discussion about *Under the Whispering Door* written by TJ Klune.

Join us next episode as we cover *Light from Uncommon Stars* by Rika Aoki.



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!