

## *Light From Uncommon stars* 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.



Amber: My name is Amber, my pronouns are she and her.

Em: My name is Em, I go by they/them pronouns.

Lisa: My name is Lisa, and I go by she and her. Rika Aoki, she/her, is a Japanese-American transgender poet, composer, teacher, and novelist. Two of her novels have been Lambda Award finalists and her work has appeared or been recognized in publications including *Vogue*, *Elle*, *Bustle*, *Autostraddle*, *PopSugar*, and *BuzzFeed*. Her poetry was featured at the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center, and she was honored by the California State Senate for extraordinary commitment to the visibility and well-being of transgender people.

E: *Light from Uncommon Stars* follows three women whose lives unexpectedly intersect. A world-renowned violin teacher dubbed the Queen of Hell, Shizuka Satomi, who has been searching for the last of seven souls that she needs to fulfill a demonic contract, which would enable her to play as she once did. A runaway named Katrina Nguyen, who has fled her violently transphobic family, loves playing video game music on her violin, and just wants to be accepted as herself. A starship captain turned donut shop owner named Lan Tran, who has brought her family across the galaxy to escape interstellar warfare and the disastrously looming end plays. Other prominent characters are Lucy Matia, who runs a violin repair shop, Tremon Philippe, the demon assigned to make sure that Shizuka fulfills her contract, Astrid, Shizuka's assistant, and the rest of Lan's family slash donut shop employees.

A: Content warnings for this book include racism, transphobia, sexual assault, and abuse.

E: The opening is kind of rough. I mean, it's hard, right? And there's a lot, I think, in this book that is difficult. I listened to it. It was difficult for me to listen to, and I'm sure it would be difficult to read. I mean, Katrina runs away from her family home very soon after the book begins its introduction to her, and that was hard to get into, for sure. It's a lot of pain right off the bat.

L: Yeah, that would have been difficult to listen to. I think, for me, it hits different when I hear it than when I read it. I'm better able to absorb it, the trauma, a little bit when I read. So it would have been rough. It was rough.

A: Yeah, I think this book has a lot of important things to say. I think my expectations were very different from what it was, because a lot of the reviews mention it being like *Good Omens*, or it's reviewed by TJ Klune. So I expected something a lot softer, I guess. And obviously, this is all extremely important for the story. It's extremely important for representation and understanding other people's experiences, specifically, in this case, Katrina as a transgender woman of color. So I think if I'd had a more accurate perception, I would have enjoyed it a lot more. If I'd been prepared to read something that was extremely graphic, right off the bat, and then occasionally throughout the book, and moments where I was just not expecting it. I think you just have to go into it expecting some of those things.

E: Yeah, definitely. And there are several moments that it kind of comes out of nowhere, and you're really not expecting. I'm thinking of one moment in particular, towards the end of the novel, where a person in a position of power, very blatantly and sort of out of nowhere, just assaults Katrina by touching her in a very intimate and inappropriate way. And it really comes out of nowhere. And that

happens not to that extent often in this book. But I mean, she talks about it a lot, right? Like, her experience with not only like sexual assault, but physical assault, emotional assault in the way of unwanted comments from strangers. It's intense, but it's also very funny. Like it's also a hysterical novel, but I don't know, it balances pain and, I don't want to say pleasure, but it balances joy and grief, I think, in a really delicate way.

L: That's a beautiful way to put it, I think. Yeah, it's very unflinching in the way it portrays some of the things that happen, like the assault and some of the comments that just, they really kind of hit you in the face, that people will say to Katrina or say about Katrina so casually. And that's pretty real. But yeah, important, because in the book, Katrina is, you know, so frightened, for instance, to reveal herself to Shizuka as transgender. And that could feel really forced or kind of manufactured drama, if you hadn't already seen and continue to see the rejection that she suffered over and over again.

E: Yeah, that's a really good point. Lisa, I mean, she's terrified at the at beginning of the novel, and she's still very, you know, frightened as the novel continues, you see her as Shizuka opens up her home to Katrina, and as Katrina and Shirley become closer, and we see Katrina, you know, be respected for her gender identity and as a woman and as a woman who deserves human decency, right? Like, as we see more people treat her like a woman who deserves respect, simply for existing.

A: I think you're absolutely right, that despite all of this stuff, which, I also read it in smaller chunks, which I think was is not the way to read this novel. But despite all of that, is always kind of leading toward a hopeful place for, I think, for every character in the book. I'm not going to say anything specific about the ending. And also, I don't think I could have expected the ending because I just didn't see that coming. But I think despite all of the stuff that happens to Katrina, and all the things we see, it does always lead towards, like, a more hopeful place for all of them.

E: One of my favorite moments in this book was when Shizuka and Katrina, it's like a least favorite moment into a great moment, it's this whole experience they have going dress shopping for a recital dress. And Katrina just begs Shizuka not to take her into stores, really, anytime they go anywhere. Katrina sort of begs Shizuka, like, please don't take me. You don't have to go with me. I don't have to go. People are not going to treat us well in public. And it happens several times. I mean, like we see it in different circumstances, in different areas of service, Katrina being treated poorly because she is a trans woman, or implied because she is a trans woman, or possibly because she is, you know, an Asian person. It could be, you know, both levels of bigotry, either one. But they go into one department store, and they're treated rather poorly. And then they go into another department store, and the clerk, I think their name was Kev, if I remember correctly, just right away, is just very kind to Katrina and asks her pronouns, tells her what their pronouns are. They say, like, oh, she/her, by the way, and I'm they/them. It's just like very casual. And this moment of, I think, just peace throughout a lot of other very, like, tumultuous interactions. There's a lot of anxiety, I think, in this book, when Katrina goes anywhere, that's not, you know, Shizuka's house. Yeah, again, it's hard to read, it's hard to listen to, it's hard to kind of put yourself in Katrina's world. I think that Rika, in that way, probably, I can imagine this was a very difficult novel to write, right? Trying to capture that othering that people do in very casual and blatant ways. But I really appreciate that vulnerability, and taking the time to, again, really dig into what it is like to be a trans woman of color, just like going anywhere, and the way that people look at you or say things.

L: The dress moment was, it was such a good moment. To a certain extent, you know, narratively, I expected it, I expected eventually she would find somewhere that she could find the right outfit and all of that. Like, that's kind of a common trope. But I just loved it when she tries on the first dress. It's amazing. She feels great in it. And then Kev is like, here's four more. Keep going with this. You don't get just one. I love that.

E: And she's so excited that it like zips up over her shoulders. I love that moment when she's talking about how the dress isn't supposed to fit her kind of body. But then it does. It fits her perfectly. And it's such an affirming moment for her. Like, I am a woman, and women's clothes do fit me. And I just

needed the right assistant to treat me with respect and kindness and help me find clothing and somebody who would work with me and see me in that way.

A: That was such a sweet moment. And it kind of brings me to another point. Shirley, who is Lan Tran's daughter, later in the story offers to alter Katrina's appearance. And Katrina doesn't want that. I think despite all of the pain she goes through and the trouble she goes through being seen as a woman, she doesn't want to change who she is, because she already is a woman. And I think that sentiment is shown really beautifully in that scene.

E: Well, and it shows that the physical isn't what makes a woman, right? And she talks about, too, in that scene, and something that she struggles with a lot throughout the course of the novel, physically, are her hands, right? She talks about how she doesn't like the shape of her hands. But in that scene, and this is much later in the novel, she mentions to Shirley specifically how her hands would have to relearn the violin. Her hands would not be as trained anymore if Shirley were to change their shape and their size. And Shizuka, her teacher at this point, has said, oh, the width that your hands can stretch, that's a miracle. That's a marvel, right? You should be proud of your hands and the notes that they can reach, and they do great things for you as a musician. And so, in that moment, too, I think it's beautiful, because not only has Katrina really been able to free herself through playing music again, because we found that her family was very unsupportive of her pursuing the violin. Her father had a pretty homophobic relationship with music and what that means when a young man plays music, or in this case, a young woman, right? Katrina's a woman, but we have flashback scenes where it is her childhood, and she's dealing with this very abusive family life. But at this point in the novel, she's really freed herself through her musical practice, and now she is able to draw the relationship between her body being a tool to free herself through her musical practice. So, she's accepted, kind of spiritually, herself, through her playing with Shizuka and her becoming this incredible musician. And then she accepts herself physically, too, as something that allows her to express herself through music. And I thought that was cool on a couple of different levels.

A: One thing that came up, and this is one of those things that was really hard to read, was bigotry within marginalized communities. And specifically, early in the book, Katrina has run away. She has gone to somebody she thinks is a safe person. It's this guy named Evan, I think, that she met at a queer youth conference. And because of her past experience with him, she thinks that this is going to be a safe place. And then he and his friends just take advantage of her. And that hurts in a very unique way, because she went into the space expecting to be accepted, and to be treated with kindness and then wasn't. I think that's the first part of the book that I was like, oh, this is not what I expected it to be. But I think that's something that marginalized communities... I mean, I can only speak from the perspective of a queer woman. Even within our communities, because we experience some sort of oppression or some sort of bigotry, that like, that gives us a pass from hurting other people the same way. And it's something that's always really frustrated me, because you look at that person and you expect them to understand and be better, because that's something that they've experienced. And then they're just as bad or worse, because they think have a pass. So that whole first section for Katrina was so hard to read.

E: Yeah. And not only does she have other people in the queer community being very anti-Asian, from the moment she arrives at Evan's house, he says some really racist comment about the across-the-street neighbor, and then closes the door in her face. And she has to sleep on a bench until she's able to come back later, when it's an opportune moment for her to stay. Bags in hand, she's just run away. And then after she goes away, or I think on the bus ride there, she has people in the Asian community saying things about, is she a boy or a girl? And so you have an example of intersectionality, in that queer people can be racist, and people within a marginalized ethnic group can be homophobic or transphobic. And just like Amber said, just because you belong to one group doesn't mean that you are immune from being prejudiced yourself. Yeah, Evan very much is the stereotypical problematic white gay. Hurt to read. Hurt to read as a person who doesn't even experience this kind of bigotry, right? So I can't even imagine. I want to talk about Shizuka and Shizuka's relationship with Katrina, that whole dynamic. We've spent a lot of time talking about

Katrina, but another, arguably the other main character of this book is Shizuka Satomi, her violin teacher. I thought it interesting, the conversations that Shizuka had with Tremon about justifying why or why not she was or was not going to deliver Katrina's soul to the demon to fulfill her contract to hell. Just the whole contract with hell is an interesting plot device.

A: It's so interesting, because obviously there are a lot of really serious topics in this book. And you read the description and you're like, oh, you're trying to deliver people's souls to hell. And you expect that to be one of like a serious plot device, and it's just not. I mean, it's important for Shizuka, ultimately, but I feel like people, with the exception of Shirley, first time she figures it out, are like, that's a little sketchy, but we're going to just get past this. It's very strange.

L: Yeah, I kind of felt the same way. I mean, I grew to love Shizuka, but never really resolved the fact she'd already gone ahead and damned six people. And they do try to make clear that all those contracts were entered into willingly. But even so, they were young people and she was their trusted teacher. So it's pretty sketchy.

A: It kind of seems like when Shizuka entered this contract, she herself was young and vulnerable. And so this is kind of a cycle that she's entered into. So, she was young and vulnerable and made a bad decision, and in order to come back from that, she has to do the same thing to seven other people. That's not like a main point in this book at all, but it's an interesting observation of breaking a cycle, ultimately breaking a cycle. Not for those first six, unfortunately.

E: And Shizuka enters the contract, not only when she's very young and vulnerable, but also has health issues. And she wants so very badly to play the violin. And she describes all of her other students as being desperate, like having something that they would give anything to be that level of violin player. And I think that's hard to reconcile. At least for me, when Shizuka was really growing on me as this affectionate guardian of Katrina, you really hoped that she wouldn't fulfill the contract, right? Like you're watching their relationship grow and knowing all the while that Shizuka has this contract to fulfill and Katrina's the seventh soul. But I agree, it does feel very silly. Like, Tremon Philippe, the demon he's described as every time is looking like a frog, right? So you're not really afraid of him. There are these moments of fear, but he's just this like slimy entity. And at one point, I remember Lan Tran, who is this interspace captain— Shizuka tells her very early on, and she doesn't take it seriously because she says something to the effect of, I don't concern myself with the metaphysical legends of each planet, or something like that. She basically just brushes it off as if like, oh, hell is not real. Like there's no power here. Plot-wise, I was confused. It felt like, out of place. Like, the space travel and the contract with hell being in the same universe, and then also there being like a meta-commentary about how the space traveler didn't think that the contract with hell was all that serious was like, okay, then what's the issue? Like why? It was interesting.

A: It's a tonally very interesting book because you're given in the description the stuff that you're going into, and then the things you expect to be, like, a big deal are not really a big deal. And the things that are a big deal are like actual real-life things that the person reading this book is probably a little bit closer to. But yeah, the contract with hell and then interstellar war, you expect to be a big deal plot-wise, and then it's kind of not.

E: Yeah, it's very much about interpersonal relationships, this book, I think, and the way that the different characters interact with one another and also interact with the world around them and where they see themselves and the role that they have and their own ways of seeking personal fulfillment. Like for Shizuka, it's the contract. For Katrina, I would say it's in the course of this novel, it's becoming a phenomenal violinist, right? And also, just like finding personhood. And then for Lan Tran, it's building the Stargate and saving her family. And each of those goals is less of the content of the novel and more of the driving force behind the character's actions. I think the content of the novel is far more focused on showing how people interact with one another and far less on the supernatural or the sci-fi or any of the flashy aspects of what you would expect this book to be.

L: Yeah, there is just so much going on here. And for me, it was a little bit jarring at first, having the supernatural mixing with the, kind of, science fiction and then mixing with the very real. I really did like the way that it finally all came together. There were some things that I thought were missteps. I won't get into details. But then there's the whole subplots of people we didn't even talk about. The Matias, the whole donut clan, just all of these very distinct, interesting people dealing with their own issues and lives. And in general, I would give it a thumbs up. I enjoyed it.

A: There's all this stuff going on, and there's so many things to think about and talk about. But one of the things that sort of balanced out the really hard things to read was how beautifully things were written about, like the way that music is described and the way that they talk about food in regards to their culture and in regards to how it makes them feel like home. It's just so beautifully done. I think I probably would have read it just for that. But there's also lots of other good stuff.

E: Yeah, I honestly don't know if I would have finished this on my own if it weren't for reading it for the podcast. I mean, it's a great book. I really enjoyed listening to it. And I agree with Amber, the prose is beautiful. And I think that that is one thing that really kept me going. The prose and also, really wanting to know what was going to happen with all these characters, right? You're introduced to so many people. And as we mentioned, we really hope for the best for all of them. We just want to see them be happy. And they're all hilarious in their own way. I really love seeing the dynamics between these characters. All around, I think it's got a lot. It's like a fantastical sitcom.

A: It's by no means a light read, though.

E: No.

L No.

A: No. That wraps up our discussion of *Light from Uncommon Stars* by Ryka Aoki. Join us next episode as we discuss *The Taking of Jake Livingston* by Ryan Douglass.



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