

The Taking of Jake Livingston 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.



Danielle: Hello, I'm Danielle and I go by she/they.

Sora: Hi, I'm Sora and I go by they/them.

Annika: And I am Annika and any pronoun is fine for me.

D: This week we're *discussing The Taking of Jake Livingston*, a queer young adult horror novel from Brian Douglas. Brian Douglas is an author, poet and freelance writer from Atlanta, Georgia. He is author of the New York Times bestselling YA horror novel, *The Taking of Jake Livingston* and the poetry book *Boy in Jeopardy*.

S: Jake Livingston is one of the only Black kids at St. Clair Prep, one of the others being his infinitely more popular older brother. It's hard enough fitting in, but to make matters worse and definitely more complicated, Jake can see the dead. In fact, he sees the dead all around him all the time. Most are harmless, stuck in their death loops as they relive their deaths over and over again. They don't interact often with people. But then Jake meets Sawyer, a troubled teen who shot and killed six kids at his local high school last year before taking his own life. Now a powerful, vengeful ghost, he has plans for his afterlife, plans that include Jake. Suddenly, everything Jake knows about ghosts and the rules to life itself go out the window. As Sawyer begins haunting him and bodies turn up in his neighborhood, high school soon becomes a survival game. One Jake is not sure he is going to win.

A: Content warning: sexual assault.

D: Alrighty, so dead people. Seeing those, that would be great. Terrifying, too.

A: Right. Very heavy book. It was a bold move to show both the point of view of the school shooter and the main character. Especially since I, for one, never expected to feel sorry for a school shooter. I mean, eventually I did not, but just the past Sawyer I felt sorry for.

D: Yeah, definitely. So, having gone through some of the similar things that Sawyer has gone through with mental health and everything, I definitely related to a lot of that. But on the other end, you also see how crappy he is as a human being.

A: Yeah, it is nice that the author did do both points of view because it does show that you don't have to end up doing the things that Sawyer did. You can have a similar life path. You can have an absent mother. You can have a crappy school life. You can have zero friends. And you can have a horrible father. And you can end up okay. And honestly, even Jake had some extraneous stuff going on with being able to see ghosts and things that I feel like could have been even more of a push to push him over the edge.

S: I think it definitely shows that in the end, our decisions are what make us who we are. And Jake's internal thought process and everything throughout the book definitely shows that, you know, he's going through the same types of stress that Sawyer went through, but is making an active decision not to make the same mistakes or to go completely evil through it.

A: Right. Yeah.

S: And yeah, I would also like to say that, you know, Jake's character is very, was super well written. Like, everything that Jake went through in his own mind was super relatable. It's all feelings that pretty much anybody in the LGBTQ+ community has felt at one point or another. And the good representation that's in the book and the fact that it's so relatable is great because a lot of us in the community have a hard time making friends for whatever reason. We're either in the closet or our community doesn't have a lot of other LGBTQ+ people. So a lot of us default to media and books. So seeing that somebody else has the same thought processes and feelings that we do is great representation and helps us feel like we're not alone.

A: Absolutely.

D: Yes. And I was going to say as somebody who's like part of that community and also Black, I feel like this book is really important for young Black teens struggling with those same type of things. Now, they're not going to be dealing with ghosts and everything, but going to a predominantly white school, dealing with racism, all of that's covered in there.

A: Yeah. And the fact that Jake at one point does say that if Sawyer had come out and been just a white gay kid, then he would have been more accepted than Jake ever would have. He was saying that due to his culture around him, he would have to be completely hidden even if he were to find a boyfriend.

S: Yeah. It's an unfortunate truth that the Black community has it way worse than those of us who are white or white-passing, unfortunately.

D: Yes. And I like how the book deals with racism in a very good way in this book.

A: Yes.

D: For example, like I was saying earlier, the part with the principal and saying how he's going to call the cops on him, but he didn't want to be seen as racist.

A: And then Jake saying about the fact that the principal was not the student that the principal wanted to protect. It was the other kid, the white kid.

S: Because why should the principal feel like he's being racist for calling the cops whenever Jake isn't the one who did something wrong? Is that basically the situation I'm understanding?

D: Yeah. And unfortunately, that still happens in schools like that.

A: I feel like I know the author super well now because not only do I feel like maybe he had a lot of the similar feelings that Jake has, obviously not the same ghost parts, but if you look at his author picture and the picture on the front, they are twins. And man, can he write. His descriptions are just fabulous. You feel like you know exactly what he's trying to get across, even when he uses non-standard ideas. He doesn't use cliched types of descriptions. And it just feels so realistic. And you can absolutely feel and see exactly what he's trying to convey, which is something that's hard in a non-visual media. I mean, just fabulous. And the way he writes horror, oh my goodness, so, so good. I was horrified, like seriously.

D: Yeah, like I was saying earlier, for a YA novel, that's really good, because my problem with most YA novels is that the characters, they seem to be very two-dimensional. And this one went very in-depth. I felt like I could see the worms coming out of Sawyer's body.

A: Which is absolutely what she wanted the book. And like the demons and the gaunts or something, lights? I can't remember what that thing was. But yeah, oh my goodness, they were super creepy.

S: I always like it when the YA stories are a little bit darker, though, because it shows that, you know, just because young adults and kids that are in that age range, doesn't mean that they're not capable of handling and understanding those types of plot lines and processing, you know, real things that could happen. I'm not necessarily talking about the book part, because I don't think that's real. Like, the discrimination and everything that happens in the book.

A: Right, yeah. I mean, just because teens are teens, it doesn't mean they're not going through this. And this book did really cover a lot of very tough topics in a very positive kind of way.

D: Yeah, I like how they covered the topics, not in a very trashy way. It wasn't like one after the other. It all intertwined and flowed very well.

A: Right, yeah, there was no point at which I was like, this is just unrealistic, and I have to set it down. It was a lot of trauma, but I felt like it, you know, like you said, it flowed. I also enjoyed that it had a positive ending, because I was super worried that the main character and the evil ghost character were going to end up together, and thankfully they did not. I was glad that he was given a much better love interest, who is super sweet and adorable and they all love.

S: Villain ending up with the main character is definitely a way overused trope in LGBTQ+ things.

A: Gosh, yes.

S: Like you're just supposed to forgive them for every single toxic thing they've done to you.

A: Yeah, exactly. No, thanks.

D: The classic enemies to lovers.

A: Yeah, right. Except, you know, worst horrible murderer to lovers.

[laughter]

S: Yeah, going back to who ends up being the love interest, I love the fact that he's so charismatic. Like at the end, whenever they're in the restaurant and to the waiter, he's just like complimenting the waiter's tattoos with all of, and he describes it as having lots of different like cartoon and video game tattoos. And I always love that because I have those kinds of tattoos myself. And that's the first time I've ever seen it in a book where somebody's like, they're covered in cartoon tattoos. So it was great representation for me.

D: I love how Jake and Alistair are completely opposites.

A: Yeah, like bubbly and outgoing versus sit back and watch the world barely talk. Yeah, complete opposite. I do enjoy that Alistair's name may be like a hat tip to Alistair Crowley, who was a big character person during the spiritualism movement in the turn of the century. I just thought that was kind of funny.

D: Speaking of being outgoing, the scene where they broke into Sawyer's house.

A: Oh yes, we certainly were having fun. Just the little added piece of the sari over the license plate, just was a little icing on the cake. And the fact that the mom comes out and sort of vaguely shoots at them once and then kind of is like, whatever, just feels like it really kind of described her character. Not a whole lot of motivation to actually fix things.

S: Well, to be fair, I mean, I think we had talked about before she didn't even realize they took anything.

A: Right, yeah.

S: Probably just thought it was just like a bunch of teenagers playing a prank or something.

A: True enough.

D: Yeah, I'm trying to like imagine it from his sister's point of view, Sawyer's. Just imagine teenagers coming into your house and taking your dead mother's sari.

S: I'm like, what the heck?

A: I did find it somewhat symbolic though that the shed out back, the one where Sawyer always hid was falling apart. It was described as "pieces of the shed," rather than actually being a shed. And I was like, that's kind of a nice visual there.

D: I also liked seeing the lead up to the school shooting that Sawyer did.

A: Yeah.

D: It wasn't too in-depth, too gory.

A: Yeah, as we were reading along the diary entries, I'm kind of like, well, none of this really feels like enough. But the day of his entry then definitely gave us a major catalyst.

S: I think it's kind of important for those types of scenes, especially if it's like a real world event to be kind of traumatic and serious in books because it gives people an idea that that's a thing that actually happened. Those feelings are real. Because I think a lot of people don't really understand what it's like to be in that type of traumatic situation.

A: Just the fact that Sawyer's diary and Jake himself both say a lot, no one listens. It is quite disheartening to know that that's something that actually a lot of young people do go through.

S: Hopefully if an older audience reads this, they'll stop and think the next time they write off somebody else's personal feelings.

A: Right, right. Or like if someone says help, maybe help. Because I do have to wonder how things would have changed if Sawyer had gotten the help that he needed instead of just being one thing after another and never getting the actual medication or the therapy that he needed.

S: He might have still turned out to be a bad person, but he also might not have killed six people, so.

A: Yes. Yeah, I mean, you could tell in his diaries that he was struggling deeply with being a person, just in general. So, I mean, it is altogether possible he could have ended up doing the same thing, but you never know.

D: As bad as he was, I think it's very important that they showed his side of the story and showed how those situations can be in the real world.

A: Exactly. Because it's something that people don't think about a lot. They're just like, that person was evil. So, therefore.

S: But then showing Jake's point of view where he's gone through similar stuff and then chose to make the right decision despite that.

A: Yes.

S: You know that no matter what you're going through, you can choose to make the right decision. That it's more of what you have morally going on rather than what you've been through.

A: Yes. Yes.

D: I also love how that all was covered in a little fun horror novel. I didn't expect that at all. I was like, oh my gosh, he sees ghosts. This is going to be great.

A: That's why I bought it. I bought it in the first place because I'm like, ooh, this cover is bad. He sees ghosts. I can't wait. And then I'm like, whoa, there's an actual deep story here too.

S: Like there's only 200—

A: Like wordplay and beautifulness.

S: There's only 246 pages and the amount of representation in the book for that and what's described and everything is fantastic. That definitely takes some talent.

A: Yeah, it definitely felt like I read a much meatier book. But yeah, it's so small.

S: But I think that opens up the conversation about how there's so much more room for him to write a second book.

A: Yeah.

S: Because we'd have a lot more time to basically see how he's able to recover from all the traumatic things that he went through. It gives another option to explore the romantic subplot line since we only really get to see a lot of that at the end of the book. There's so much more content that could be written.

A: Yes. Totally here for Alistair, Jake, and Fiona doing a ghost fun thing.

D: I also like the part of when Jake was in the school being controlled by Sawyer and everything, and he meets River and she kind of takes back her life. And that's really symbolic in a way when you think about it. Even though she's dead, she can't take back her life. But I like how she defeated Sawyer. And she was able to move on and go about her life. And she didn't hurt anybody in the process.

A: Right.

S: The only person she hurt was the one who hurt her.

A: I loved the symbolism of her ripping her hands back from him because her hands had been missing. And that was the one thing that she felt that was keeping her from being able to contact her mom, because she had her phone, but she couldn't touch it. So, ripping her hands back from him was really the symbolism of taking back her power.

S: And how ironic is it that the main villain ended up being taken down by revenge when that was his whole plot is that he wanted revenge on everybody who did him wrong. But in turn, that was how he was defeated by he ended up doing wrong to her and she took it all back. And now he's over. Yes.

D: My other favorite scene was when Jake was in class and they were talking about *The Crucible*. Such a good book, by the way. And he ends up stabbing his classmate's hand.

A: Normally, I'm not into violence, but man, that was just so good. Like, you kind of waited for it the whole book and then just was so satisfying. And his friend is just, he reaches across his friend to do it and she's just like, okay, that's what you're doing now.

D: Based on everything that Chad said, he definitely deserved it.

A: Absolutely.

S: Sometimes you just have to let your friend make the wrong decision, right?

A: Absolutely.

D: Look the other way.

A: While cheering.

S: That wraps up our discussion about *The Taking of Jake Livingston* by Ryan Douglas. Join us next episode where we cover *Elatsoe* written by Darcie Little Badger.



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