

Gideon the Ninth Transcript

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

Em: Hi, I'm Em, I go by they/them pronouns.

Lisa: And I'm Lisa, and my pronouns are she and her.

J: Today on Reading the Rainbow we are going to talk about Tamsyn Muir's *Gideon the Ninth*. Tamsyn Muir is the best-selling author of the Locked Tomb series. Her fiction has won the Locus and Crawford Awards and been nominated for the Hugo Award, the Nebula Award, the Shirley Jackson Award, the World Fantasy Award, the Dragon Award, and the UG Foster Memorial Award. A Kiwi, she has spent most of her life in New Zealand. She currently lives and works in Oxford in the United Kingdom.

L: (Synopsis) The emperor needs necromancers. The ninth necromancer needs a swordsman. Gideon has a sword, some dirty magazines, and no more time for undead nonsense. Tamsyn Muir's *Gideon the Ninth* unveils a solar system of swordplay, cutthroat politics, and lesbian necromancers. Her characters leap off the page as skillfully animated as arcane revenants. The result is a heart-pounding epic science fantasy. Brought up by unfriendly ossifying nuns, ancient retainers, and countless skeletons, Gideon is ready to abandon a life of servitude and an afterlife as a reanimated corpse. She packs up her sword, her shoes, and her dirty magazines and prepares to launch her daring escape. But her childhood nemesis won't set her free without a service. Harrowhark Nonagesimus, Reverend Daughter of the Ninth House and Bone Witch Extraordinaire, has been summoned into action. The emperor has invited the heirs of each of his loyal houses to a deadly trial of wits and skill. If Harrowhark succeeds, she will become an immortal, all-powerful servant of the resurrection. But no necromancer can ascend without their cavalier. Without Gideon's sword, Harrow will fail, and the Ninth House will die. Of course, some things are better left dead.

E: I think it's important to let people know that it is a little confusing and to keep with it. It does get more clear the longer that you read the book, and I think it doesn't really become 100% clear what's going on until like 75% of the way through the book. You collect tidbits of the mystery of not only the universe, but also what's going on in Canaan House. The more time you spend seeing things through Gideon's eyes. You have all of the information that she has, and she doesn't have very much.

J: Yeah, you don't have the luxury of having a backstory, you don't have an omniscient point of view, and that's very much the way this book series approaches it. You have the limited knowledge that the characters have. But also, it's like you're first starting out observing those characters, and you don't know their backstory until maybe it's revealed partway through. It's really interesting, and there's no info dump, and you are kind of gradually understanding and putting the world together.

L: So you're slowly picking up context clues, and the world building is more organic.

J: Yes. It seems very real because of that.

E: We can explain the world sort of like a theocracy, almost, in the sense that the Reverend Emperor, Necromancer, who revived the universe after this hinted destruction and death of everything, he's referred to as God, right? And so you have this emperor who is very clearly revered as sort of the leader of the new humanity, as it were, but he's also seen as this God undying because he has learned the secrets of necromancy and has been able to establish the nine houses, which are where the characters come from. They each come from a house. So it's this sort of theocratic world, wherein the ruler is also sort of the God. He is the God. I mean, they call him God, which is interesting because everybody kind of ascribes to that. There's not really any pushback from any of the characters. In fact, they want to serve as his hand. They want to become lifters and serve at the hand of the emperor or as the hand of the emperor, which I think is interesting because often when you have a theocracy in fantasy, there's a group of people that is in resistance to that theocracy. And I don't really think that we see that here. I think everybody's kind of in line with the same sort of, to some extent.

J: I think there's a hint of the resistance at the very end of the book when you find out about the Blood of Eden, which is apparently a subset of the resurrected population who do fight back against the emperor. There are nine houses total, eight of which are populated because the first house is the resurrected earth. That is just really a home for the emperor. The houses are named in order of the resurrection. So the second house is what we refer to as Mars. And then the sixth house is Mercury. Seventh house is Venus. And because the solar system was recreated through necromancy, necromancy is a common thing.

L: Something that I had a little difficulty grasping, you know, they keep referring to the resurrection, and it sounds as though this was all post-apocalyptic, and yet not all beings are resurrected beings. Many of them are living mortal beings. So I did have a little trouble grasping how in the history that came to pass.

J: I think that's a really good question because as far as I know, and I have read the second in the series, *Harrow the Ninth*, is not fully answered because originally the emperor was all by himself. And then he had resurrected the planets, and he also resurrected the people who would go on to become his original lyctors, or as they are also referred to as his saints. And then it talks about creating the different houses, but it's not really clear whether or not those are resurrected people or if some people are resurrected and then they go on to have children organically. It's really creepy to think about.

L: Yes, yes it is.

J: So where the story takes place now is 10,000 years after the solar system was resurrected. And during that time, the lyctors had started dying off, so there were eight originally. And so many dying off had made the emperor realize that he needs to send out a summons to the heirs of the houses to go to the first house and see if they are also able to go ahead and ascend. And that's what kind of kicks off the entire thing, because Harrow gets the summons and prevents Gideon's escape.

E: I think part of us not knowing these things too is by design, and also a characterization thing, because we follow Gideon through most of the story, and she has no desire to participate in the religion whatsoever at all. From the very first moment that we meet her, she is not devout, not devout whatsoever. She does not want to be a nun. She is criticized for being crass and insubordinate. And so I think a big part of, you know, the story and being so confused sometimes is that Gideon doesn't have this information, but Harrow does. And so we want so badly, like Gideon does, to know what Harrow knows. And I think something I really liked over the course of this is watching their relationship develop and watching the way that they do end up sharing information and trusting one another. And it feels nice as a reader to know more about the world that you're reading about, but it also feels nice as a reader to watch that development and see how Gideon learns that new information and how she becomes more invested in what they're doing. It's an interesting way to go about, you know, revealing the world and world-building through a character who doesn't particularly care about the circumstances to

a character who is fully invested in the circumstances by the end of the novel. I appreciated that character development quite a bit.

L: To that point, I was a little perplexed that the glossary of terms was at the end of the book because I really could have done with that information going in. You were clearly very impressed with the slow way the information was meted out, and I was much more frustrated by it, and sometimes had trouble following because I kept skipping back and going, “did I miss something? What's happening? Who is this?” And being able to go back and say, okay, this is what a cavalier is, this is how the world was established, this is who Necrolord Prime is, would have helped me to launch into the story and invest in it more quickly.

E: Jamie and I have also read this before, so I remember reading this for the first time and feeling very similar to you, Lisa. I was like, “what is going on?” I had to stop and put the book down several times because it is very confusing. The book is separated into acts, and the first two acts, really, I was very confused. The first act especially, I think it's important to note too that, I don't think we've mentioned this yet, but Gideon and Harrow come from the Ninth House, so the farthest house away that has the least communication and interaction with the other houses, they're seen as the most devout of the houses. They're just a planet of nuns and religious practitioners, basically.

L: So I will, for any listeners who know that they're like me and may give up when their questions are not answered quickly enough, try the glossary. When I started to realize that I was seeing all of these different genre elements, fantasy, science fiction, and mystery, then you're also getting some what you might call like young adult, self-discovery, you're getting action, you're even getting some romance. I was tickled by that, because I guess I just really like genre-bending or genre-defying work. It defies formula and is just surprising and definitely kept me reading, because I couldn't predict, “oh well I know when I read mysteries this is going to happen and then this is going to happen,” and if that's what I'm in the mood for, great, but this was so much more interesting because I had no idea what might crop up next.

E: Yeah, I liked it because it was very fantastical, but it was also extremely current because of the dialogue. Gideon is so funny. Gideon is so funny and the way she talks is sort of like a gamer bro. Her choices for descriptive words are again very crass, a little bit vulgar, but also she has been instructed by Harrow to not speak to anyone when they first get to Canaan House, and so you get a lot of internal monologue that is just hysterical, because she's trying to figure out like, “what is going on? I have no idea. Who are all these people? I hate Harrow. I hate Harrow so much. I hate her so much I could die.” Like it's just—it's really—I really liked Gideon, and I liked that that character was placed into a world of really, not necessarily high fantasy, but the magic in this world is really interesting to me. The necromancy is really interesting, and having a character who cares nothing for that, but just wants to fight with her sword, and is also just this like trash-talking—she doesn't take nonsense from anyone really and I really liked that. That's what really kept me reading was Gideon herself, honestly. And also wanting to know like, what was going on? Like Lisa said, just being kind of confused and wanting, you know, some sort of conclusion to that. Definitely kept me reading as well.

J: And speaking of how confusing the book is to read, the postulants themselves are as confused as the readers are when they're in Canaan House because they're just told that they're being brought there by the Emperor, they're not given any kind of instruction, other than they're supposed to try to get keys and explore the facility. And they're as clueless as the readers are.

L: I don't even think they're told that they need to get keys. They're given a hint. And that's it. No timeline, no nothing. Just go on.

E: I was just gonna say they also immediately assume they're in competition with one another. So right away, they're kind of thrown into this very confusing scenario where they have extremely little to go off of, except for the fact that they're trying to obtain sainthood, essentially, and sort of immortal life and power, and work with the Emperor and they just assume that they can't all be lyctors and so they must be in competition. So not only are they confused, but they're also really hyped up, the stakes are high, and that adds a lot of drama.

J: And what's really interesting is the letter that they received says that it hopes all eight of them ascend. But looking back, having read the book, that particular interpretation that Canaan House itself is supposed to be a form of competition changes the entire book because if they had all been cooperating together, the end result might have been very, very different. So we talked about people being summoned to Canaan House. The people who are summoned are just the necromancer of each of the houses and their cavalier. Do we want to talk about the relationship between necromancer and cavalier a bit?

L: We have to. It's so vital to the book. And the reason that Harrow drags Gideon along with her is because the cavalier she's been assigned, and presumably took a vow with, is just wholly unsuitable as a cavalier. They're supposed to find some sort of balanced relationship. The reason that Harrow drags Gideon along with her for this task is because the cavalier she was assigned is completely unsuitable. Everyone else's cavalier is a fighter. And the cavaliers of the ninth house have, over the centuries, become more servants. I think there's a joke about them: "They just have to be large enough to haul sacks of bones around." The two relationships, the magic user and the fighter, are supposed to complement each other, and supposed to suggest that one can't really thrive without the other, which has not so far been the case with Harrow and Gideon, but it becomes clear that they're going to have to learn to work together on this puzzle.

J: So, Harrow and Gideon are heading into this challenge already at a slight disadvantage because their entire lives up to this point they had been adversaries. They had so many fights between them. They regarded each other as an enemy. And all the other houses for this have been together for years. Sometimes their bond was familial. So, some of them are second cousins or distant cousins. There's a pair that are even married to each other. But in every case besides this, there's a very deep, lasting bond between the necromancers and cavaliers of the other houses.

E: I think it's important to note too that a mystery for Gideon and Harrow specifically that really affects their relationship is: Gideon and Harrow are the only two children in all of the ninth house. At one point there were over 200 children in the ninth house, and then there were just Gideon and Harrow. So, from the very time that they were young, they have been pitted against each other, because they were the only two there and so they fight a lot. And Gideon really does not want to go with Harrow to the first house at all. She's trying to leave the ninth house so she can join the military and make a life for herself and not be an indentured servant to Harrow and to the ninth house. And that definitely creates a power struggle between the two of them, especially when they get to Canaan House. And Harrow spends a lot of time not divulging information to Gideon whatsoever at all, and that causes Gideon to sort of push back against that authority that Harrow kind of exhumes over her, because she's not, you know, it's sort of a life or death situation, and Harrow's not being totally, she's withholding information.

J: And that withholding of information actually causes Gideon to presume the worst about her when the other postulants start getting killed off. And then that's another whole mystery. Who's killing off the postulants? What's happening? That tests Gideon's and Harrow's relationship sorely. And then Harrow finally lets down her guard and lets Gideon see her as a person instead of Harrowhark, the ninth, and then all those other titles, and it's just Harrow.

L: A lot of secrets are revealed. Obviously, we don't want to give the game away. Yeah, one of the things that we do get is the two of them finally address their relationship, which has been so brutal and cruel up to that point. And when we first see them together, they're fighting to the death, or nearly, and that they're barely pulling their punches and expressing how much they hate each other. And in this moment, in the pool, is when Harrow becomes completely vulnerable, and she tells some secrets, and kind of puts it all out there, not even hoping for forgiveness, just needing to...

E: Absolve herself of that information, or...?

L: Yeah, that's a good way to put it.

J: Because Harrow realizes the enormity of the task that she's placed on Gideon.

E: She's also carrying an unbearable weight, and she has been by herself for a very long time. And I think she probably recognizes that the only person she can trust in this moment really is Gideon, who is also of the ninth house, who she's asked to come with her to this seemingly impossible task that has become more and more dangerous the longer they've been there. And it's sort of a test of their relationship, because in that moment Gideon really could just decide to kill her. But instead she, I think she apologizes to Harrow for all of the difficulty that Harrow has had to shoulder alone, and Harrow gets angry at her, because Harrow has spent her whole life sort of tormenting Gideon. And Gideon, now faced with the understanding that Harrow has, and faced with the context that she hasn't had the last 10 years, she recognizes that Harrow has acted the way she has, because of these incredibly adverse circumstances that she's been sort of bred for. We learn something about Harrow's parents that sort of places Harrow in an impossible position as she grows up, and Gideon recognizes that it really shows that Gideon has come to care for Harrow and Harrow has come to trust Gideon fully. It's a good moment for the two of them, I think.

J: And it's that revelation that allows them to be able to work more as a necromancer and cavalier really should, and that's how they're able to go ahead, get through the various challenges and...

L: Prevail.

E: I think Harrow is able to come to that moment with Gideon too because she's seen Gideon over and over literally put her life and her body on the line for Harrow to progress and obtain this Lyctorhood. Gideon also just wants to fight. That's her big thing. She loves her sword and she loves to fight, and she's willing to put her body on the line again and again to prove that she's the strongest, and also just to show that, I don't know if it's to show Harrow that she's there for her, I think it's just to prove that she's the strongest and she wants to fight anyone that she can.

L: It was a little bit jarring for me. I heard in an interview that I listened to Gideon described as a jock, sweet jock. And she is, you know, she's very physical. That's her thing. She has her exercise routine. She's always practicing her swords. And then she has these moments of incredible emotional intelligence that are just mixed in with these moments of sheer stubbornness, anger, and it makes her very real but it can also give me a bit of whiplash.

J: I think one thing I really enjoyed about this book was that all of the characters, not only the main characters of Gideon and Harrow, all felt very real and very developed. They're flawed and interesting, instead of just having a 2D effect.

L: I have to disagree with you there.

J: I'm all ears.

L: We're set up in this universe, and each house and or planet has its personality. People are constantly saying things like, "oh, that's," you know, "that's such a second house attitude," or, you know, "that's exactly what someone from the ninth house would say." And they're just defined by that culture, which I felt was just too broad of a stroke. You know, the military, for instance, they're just, you know, the two who come from the military planet are just absolutely overbearing, rule following, authoritarian. I didn't see a lot of nuance in those characters. And some we don't get to know terribly well, like the eighth house. I just didn't really know much about them, except for that they had some odd ideas about how to be devout.

J: Yeah, there are definitely characters that had more, I don't want to say screen time, because we're obviously reading, but more page time than others. So Lisa, you are also the host who wasn't as a rabid fan of the series. Can you give a little bit more information on what either turned you off or didn't appeal to you about it, about *Gideon the Ninth*?

L: One of the things was, we addressed it a little bit, well, we addressed it a lot. The relationship between Harrow and Gideon, so central to the story, so... I'm just going to go ahead and use the word toxic, because that's what it is. They have each have tremendous emotional issues, were in their own way mistreated since childhood. They weren't pitted against each other, but they pitted each other against one another, fought, brutally hurt one another, were vicious. And when they have to begin to work together and form a real bond in order to accomplish their task, it's like too easy. Gideon is so ready to commit herself to Harrow, just because Harrow stops calling her Griddle. When she's like, "oh, you know, you're asking me to do this terrible, dangerous thing. Since you called me Gideon, I'll do it." And I understand that's not 100% literal. It has to do with her beginning to show some kindness, but I feel like the move away from that toxicity was too easy. I was not convinced. During the pool scene when Harrow says, "I lived my whole wretched life at your mercy, yours alone. And God knows I deserve to die at your hand. You are my only friend. I am undone without you." I don't get it. And so it fell flat for me. The other thing, and I didn't realize this until kind of in retrospect, but I read a lot of reviews and commentary on it. And so many people commented on the humor of the book, the irreverence and the wit. And I guess it just wasn't my sense of humor. I didn't really laugh much. And one of the things that came up in a lot of reviews was the use of contemporary memes, which I didn't pick up on at all. And that may have had something to do with it, that it's making cultural references that I was not grasping.

J: Yeah, I think that can always fall flat. Whenever you're watching a popular show that makes cultural references that people who watched it when it first came out would understand, maybe a certain number of years later, that's not necessarily the case. And obviously, with the high speed of trends on the internet, memes and that kind of stuff, that can quickly age. Personally, I thought the relationship between Harrow and Gideon was believable, mostly because of the amount of exposure they had to each other in childhood. Again, like they were the only children in that house. And sometimes, especially for kids, the line between hate and love can be very thin. And so even if you're just exposed to somebody that you think you loathe, like maybe like siblings sometimes, there's still a certain amount of love there. But maybe that was just how I was able to see it.

E: Well, I thought that, you know, once it really starts getting dangerous, and they realize they can't trust anybody else there, that sort of forces them to reevaluate how they feel about one another. Just in the sense that, again, they're the only other people that they really know there. And Jamie, I agree with you that their relationship is a little bit like siblings. Obviously, you know, Harrowhark is the daughter of the Ninth. Like she's, I don't want to say she's royalty necessarily, but she's certainly held to a standard above Gideon, which sets them apart. Gideon is very clearly an indentured servant to the House of the Ninth. She's been dragged along on this impossible task that she didn't want to go to, and asked to fulfill a

role that she was never trained for. She was not trained to be the House Cavalier. She was just sort of forced into going if she wanted her freedom from the House. And so obviously that creates a dynamic of power between the two of them. But again, the way that they fight is very sibling-esque, I think. The things that they say to each other, definitely arch-rival type vocabulary. Definitely, like, "I hate you, I'd be okay if you would die." But by the time that things start getting dangerous, and the two of them start getting scared for their lives at Canaan House, I think it again forces them to re-evaluate the nature of their relationship, and to think about how much history they have with each other, as opposed to these strangers that they've just been introduced to on this completely new planet. They're also teenagers, right? They're eighteen, and I think Harrow's, what, sixteen maybe? I don't know if we know her exact age, but Gideon is eighteen I'm pretty sure. And so I think that that has something to do with it a little bit too. I mean, teenagers' emotions run high, you can change your mind pretty easily sometimes. Especially, I think, in times of fear, and that shared bond of, "What the hell's going on here?" I think definitely makes that shift from enemies to alliances a little bit more believable in my eyes. But, I do agree that, I mean they say some nasty stuff to each other. They really say some nasty stuff to each other, and then by the end of the novel, they're really willing to put their lives on the line. And that can be a huge jump. But again, it's really scary, I mean they're scared. So, I don't know if I necessarily would think it was believable or not believable. I think it's just a very particular set of circumstances.

L: I was just gonna say, I appreciate that perspective. The idea of it being sister-y did not occur to me because I thought of it as more, well the subtext of a romantic relationship, so...

J: I think the relationship between them is very particular to queer individuals, where it's like almost undefinable, like "are they friends? Are they, like..."

E: Are they falling for each other? Kind of sort of

J: It's not particularly clear to the outside and I don't think it's clear to them either.

L: That definitely changes my perspective on it, because looking at them as a romantic pair, and looking at the way they treated each other, it's like "Oh God, no. No, no, no, no, no. Don't align yourself with this person. They're gonna hurt you." When looked at with more of the familial bent, they have this shared history and they have that sibling relationship, that rivalry that when you're a child you're not thinking about it consciously, why you hate your siblings so much, they're just a pain in the ass. That definitely sheds new light on that relationship.

J: I just think their relationship is very unique and particular to begin with. So, I'm sure there are plenty of people who ship Harrow and Gideon together in this series, would be horrified to think of them in a sibling context. But at the same time, if you've known each other since babies there has to be an element of that to it.

L: So I have to ask, did you guys pick up on the memes?

J: I had picked up on some of them. I haven't caught all of them because, I'm not sure if a lot of them are, like, common to Tumblr, or a few other places in general. Em probably would have more insight into that.

E: Yeah, there were some that I caught, and then there were some that I looked up afterwards that I didn't. Like, there were definitely references while I was reading that I knew were probably a contemporary reference, but I didn't know what they were referring to. So, one example that really sticks out in my head is, again, the "Well, Harrow, you studied the books, I studied the blade," cuz that's one of my favorite memes. I think it's really funny.

L: Well, depending on the context. Sometimes it falls flat, but I thought it was funny in this context.

E: I remember the first time that I read this, there were some that I caught and some that I missed entirely, and some that I was sort of sure that I knew what they were talking about but then upon looking it up later I realized that I was totally off, or I misread something that I thought was maybe a meme and it was just Tamsyn Muir being funny, or showcasing her sense of humor in her writing.

L: The memes are incorporated into the story in a way that I think they're easily missed unless you know the references exactly. But also some are kind of in your face, like "Well you study the books, I study the blade."

J: I like to think of them as little winks.

L: Yeah

J: Little knowing winks throughout the story

L: They're like easter eggs. They're like easter eggs for folks who have been on the internet for a while, or maybe have spent too much time on the internet in a short capacity of time.

That wraps up our discussion of *Gideon the Ninth* by Tamsyn Muir. Join us next episode as we discuss *Hola Papi: How to come out in a Walmart Parking Lot and Other Life lessons* by John Paul Brammer.

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