

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

Ashley: I'm Ashley. My pronouns are she/her, they/them.

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

Amber: John Paul Bremer is a writer and artist from rural Oklahoma who is currently based in Brooklyn. He runs an advice column called "Hola, Papi" from which this book was conceived. He also runs a print shop with his original designs. His projects have included fiction, illustrated essays, food writing, and media appearances. *Hola Papi* was a 2022 Lambda Award finalist.

L: In this hilarious tenderhearted book, J.P. shares his story of growing up biracial and in America's heartland while attempting to answer some of life's most challenging questions. How do I let go of the past? How do I become the person I want to be? Is there such a thing as being too gay? Should I hook up with my grade school bully now that he's out of the closet? Questions we've all asked ourselves, surely. *Hola Papi* is a warm, witty compendium of hard-won life lessons from Harper's Bazaar. For anyone gay, straight, and everything in between who's ever taken stock of their unique place in the world. Content warnings, there are mentions of sexual assault, suicide, suicidal ideation, racism, and homophobia.

Amber: All right, so what were everyone's first impressions of this book?

Ashley: My first read-through of the book, I actually listened to it on the audiobook, and it is narrated by John Paul Brammer himself, which I highly recommend, which just makes it that much more laugh-out-loud, funny, but also very tender and vulnerable at parts. So, I really enjoyed the book. I wasn't expecting it to get so serious at times as it did, but I'm really glad for that, that he talked about a variety of different topics and things. So, I really enjoyed it. And then I read through it a second time leading up to our recording, and it was just as good the second time.

L: I love it when a book is read by the author, and this is the perfect book for that. I wish that I had listened to it, and I might go back and do that. It was a very short read, which at my first impression was that it was a light read, and the more I thought about it, maybe not so much. But he does handle even the darker topics, heavier topics with humor, and I will say surprisingly wise.

Amber: Yeah, and I think the harder topics, he sort of sandwiches between moments that make you laugh really hard, which I really appreciate, because so much of the book is lighthearted, and then you get into something that's a little harder to hear. And those are important things to talk about, especially in these kinds of experiences, exploring racial and sexual identities, and the way you are affected by the world because of those things. So it's all really important stuff to hear about, but the tone sort of makes it go down a little bit easier. If that makes any sense.

L: Yes, and you know the question, who are you to be giving me advice? First of all, I love advice columns. I religiously read Miss Manners, Dear Abby, Savage Love, and I think it's Dan Savage who says, "well really the only qualification for giving advice is having been asked." But this author goes a bit deeper than that, which I appreciate, to say, "you take them as you want, and I'm not going to try and address anything that I feel I don't have anything valuable to say about."

Ashley: Yeah, and I like that's how he starts off the book, right? Is each chapter at the beginning lists one of the questions that were submitted to his column, "Hola Papi," and the first one was, "Are you even qualified to give me advice?" So, he kind of addresses this from the get-go, and then jumps in to the following chapters that address more in-depth questions from his readers. So, I really appreciate that, yeah, right from the start, he addressed that question of like, "who are you to give me advice and tell me what to do?" And the fact, well, didn't "Hola Papi" start as kind of like a joke?

Amber: Yeah, I think he said it was kind of like originally meant to be kind of a spoof on the advice columns, but then the questions he would get and the responses he wanted to give sort of veered him towards, I guess, more of an actual advice column. I mean, he's still a little bit like tongue-in-cheek sometimes, but it seems to have developed from kind of a joke to actually genuinely giving advice as best as he could on topics he knew about.

Ashley: Yeah, and I liked in each chapter, he's very clearly thinking carefully about every question that he is responding to, but his response is never like, you need to do X, Y, and Z. It's not that, it's sharing a story from his own experiences.

Amber: I know what you're talking about, though. He answers the question, but he does it in a way that doesn't directly say, do this, then do this. It's more like anecdotal suggestion.

Ashley: So do we want to talk about some of the major themes of the book and then maybe share some of our favorite chapters?

Amber: Yeah, so one of the themes I think that comes up a lot in this book, there are several different essays talking about it in like different ways, is identity. There's an essay that he writes called "How to Be a Real Mexican," where he's trying to feel more connected with his Mexican ancestry. There's another one about, and I think we wanted to talk a little bit about this one later too, but there's one, "How to Dress Yourself in Silk and Linens," which I think is more about presentation as a queer person. There's one called "How to Decide Who to Be," which is just about identity just as a general topic and any kind of identity or thing that you do or don't identify with.

Ashley: That essay kind of broke my brain a little bit, I had to read it a couple of times. Like if I ever met that person in real life, Miguel.

L: Can you please remind me? Because that's, I definitely remember "Silk and Linen," I definitely remember "How to Be a Mexican," the other one is just, it's not coming to my mind.

Amber: Yeah, he is traveling with his parents and he meets somebody on a dating app and goes to meet him and his friends at, I think, a bar. And it seems like anytime one of his date's friends or himself state an element of what we would consider identity, in his case, that he's half Mexican, and one of the friend's cases, she's, I think, a homeowner or something or maybe not a homeowner. One of the two, he sort of scoffs at the intent to define himself by those things.

L: Okay, yes.

Amber: It was very confusing.

L: Yeah, I don't know that I got a whole lot out of that one in particular, but when I started to pick up more on the themes of identity, maybe I could go back and get a bit more out of it rereading that one.

Ashley: Yeah, I think the overarching thing with that may be what I got from it, because it's not really explicitly said at all. And it is that Miguel is on one extreme of the spectrum, right? And that he rejects any identifying label to himself and is just kind of an amalgamation of all the experiences that he has had as a person. And the question that one of John Paul's readers submitted was, "how do I become more confident in my identity?" And it reminded me of just like when you're a baby gay and you're trying to navigate all of that, having that label is really important. And there are certain things that you can do to visibly express your queer identity. And how much does that matter? Because you dress a certain way, or you wear makeup, or you don't wear makeup or anything like that, does that make you not enough? Like not gay enough, not queer enough? And I don't know, that's just kind of what it reminded of me. I don't really know what the conclusion was though. Yeah, again, I don't know how well I can talk about this essay, because I was just a little... But like towards the end of it, so John Paul's talking about how, you know, he didn't want to be tied to like hard definitions of things, like rigid titles and things. "And maybe we aren't meant to embody them. And maybe there's some freedom to be found there. Maybe there's a way to draw from both. To recognize that we are unknowable beings that exist beyond language. And to recognize that we must at times simply decide what we are and keep it moving if we are to move forward at all." So maybe not to, I don't know, find a balance. Like if you find it important, then, you know, that's valid. But not to let it hold you back.

Amber: I read that through that essay a couple of times. And I didn't quite understand where I was going. But that makes sense. Thank you, Ashley.

L: I was trying to talk to someone about this and trying to explain it to them. And like, when I started off and being like, oh, I just finished this book. And I then tried to explain what you just tried to explain, Ashley. And found that I had no words for it. And it's interesting to me that you guys remember the essays distinctly so well. Because to me, I just kind of like, I just sort of like took them all together in a kind of a wash as themes. And, you know, the idea that he's, is he a Mexican? Is he half Mexican? And at one point, his answer is, my mother is Mexican. Is he queer enough? Is his body right? All those questions. And I think that the final answer was that those labels don't, they only have the meaning that people give them. And to some extent, it doesn't matter. And is he Mexican enough? Is he queer enough? Here he is existing in the world. His family is his family. His friends are his friends. His lovers are his lovers. What does he stand to gain from trying to, from answering the question? Am I blank enough? And I think at some point, he just decided not much, actually.

Amber: Something else that he addresses in this book that I, and I'm sure most queer people really identified with, is trying to reconcile the you that existed before you realized you were gay or accepted that you were gay and afterwards. And he would just say things and I'd be like, "oh yeah, it do be like that."

Ashley: Yeah, and I think one of my favorite essays that kind of talks about that, Amber, is "How to Kiss Your Girlfriend."

Amber: Yes.

Ashley: But in this essay, it's towards the beginning, he's talking about his middle school/high school relationship with friend named Rebecca and how, like one of his first like real close friends that he really connected with and how they then kind of turned that into dating and how it didn't really work out. But

how, you know, at the end, he's reflecting on how that doesn't mean that it was a waste of time or anything like that just because he figured out then that he's gay, you know, but that he values his relationship with her and their friendship and that time that they had together. It reminded me very much of middle school where I had like a couple of friends like brought up to me in the hall while I was at my locker saying that, "this kid likes you, like, will you go out with him?" And he was like down the hall, like awkwardly like watching. And so I gave into peer pressure and I said, "yeah, sure." And then it turned out that like a year later, he came out as gay and everyone was like, "oh, you turned this kid gay. Like, how do you feel about that?" I was like, "well, joke's on you, I'm also gay." But like, it was kind of the same thing where we had a very close friendship then. And I really needed that at that time. And it kind of opened it up to like more friendships, like with his friends that led into high school, it was really good friends. And so what was a very hard school year turned out to be an enjoyable one. But the fact that people just kind of focused on the fact that like, "oh, he's gay now. Like, how do you feel about that?" Like, what a waste, blah, blah. I was like, I don't know. It just, it really, this essay kind of, I could really relate to.

Amber: Yeah, I really liked the conclusions he came to in this one. Like, I mean, you sort of already said, but anytime you spend like loving someone regardless of the type of love that is and having experiences that you ultimately learn more about yourself. And I mean, that that time isn't wasted, even if it's not what you're ultimately going to want. I like that a lot. I like the idea that you can have an experience that ends in a way that you don't, that you didn't want it to, but that that time was still valuable regardless.

L: Yeah, a relationship that doesn't last forever isn't necessarily a failed relationship.

Ashley: Yeah, that was much more eloquently said. Thank you, Amber and Lisa. I found the quote though that made me laugh. He's like talking about how Rebecca and him had just started dating and their relationship was budding. And he says, "Look, Lisa, I had a vague idea that I was gay, although I'd never ever used that word. I thought myself more as a person with unique difficulty accessing heterosexuality." And that just made me laugh. Because that's exactly what I thought. I just have to try harder, you know?

L: That's good. Another one of the essays that I really enjoyed is the "How to Come Out to Your Boyfriend in a Walmart Parking Lot" one. Just because I would love to take a poll of queer people and see how many on average had some kind of like intense friendship in high school that you didn't clock as queer until you're older. Because I feel like it's like every queer person I've ever met is like, "yeah, so we weren't technically dating, but we were kind of dating and neither of us were out yet. So yeah."

Amber: And it's just years later and you're like, "oh my gosh."

Ashley: So that chapter, that was a good one. And it kind of addresses a lot of different topics. And the question that starts that one was, "Hola Papi, how do I let go of a rotten relationship? Signed, addicted to you." That's the one where he's talking about his high school friend Corey, right? Who was into like, well, JP calls it a religious cult, but it was like a youth group, right?

Amber: Yeah, well, the description given really did sound like a cult. But without further information, we can just call it a youth group. But yeah, that's the one he's... His friend was originally trying to evangelize to him. And then they just became really close friends instead. And other things than normal friendships entail. But yeah, I think that one was... The point that I got out of that one, other than my deep amusement at just lack of obliviousness, in youth is that being honest with your relationships, whatever manner they take, making the right decisions for yourself on how to proceed once you understand it better. And like, obviously for this one, it was a problematic relationship because JP was understanding of himself as being queer and being in love with his friend and his friend wasn't ready to, and might not ever have been ready to meet him there. And so it was really unhealthy for him in the way that he just kept pining after his best

friend. And healthy for his friend because he was compartmentalizing it as, again, a super heteronormative thing to do with your BFF. And even though confronting that ended the relationship, it was ultimately better for JP because then he could move on from it.

Ashley: Yeah, and I think it's important to note, this was one of the longer essays and it spans a series of years, like from high school into college, that this was kind of like a friendship, but it was like off and on again with like romantic tendencies, I guess you could call it. And so the fact that, yeah, JP was kind of strung along like that for so long, it was, yeah.

L: And it, I mean, it hurt to read.

Ashley: Yeah.

L: The way he kind of came to the realization without, he says, having the language for it, that he was in love with Corey and basically just the relationship he was willing to accept to hang on to him. I think in our discussion, it's really kind of becoming clear, like just how much is here in this very brief book.

Ashley: Yeah, for sure. I mean, it's only what? It's less than 200, oh no, I guess it's just over 200 pages. So it is very short, but he does manage to fit in these essays about all these different relationships that he's had and people that have been in his life and the traumas that he's experienced and like how he has acknowledged them and then learned how to cope with them. It is a lot. And to me, it was just very impressive that he could be so open and vulnerable about all of these things. Like personally, it's not easy to, I just generally look back and reflect on your past experiences, especially as a teen or young adult, but also like unearthing those traumas and reflecting on them and using them to kind of help other people with their questions and their problems. It was just, I don't know, I felt a little overwhelmed by that. I was just very impressed and also grateful that I've never, I don't think I've ever read anything that was like this humorous, but also like touching and impactful and meaningful.

L: Did either of you seek out the actual advice column?

Amber: I have not yet, but I did subscribe to email newsletters. So presumably we'll be getting those shortly.

L: Nice.

Ashley: Yeah, I think he was on hiatus for a while, but he recently just started it up back up again. Is that right, Lisa?

L: I'm not actually sure. I did not seek it out. This is not one I had ever heard of before, but I'm kind of excited to go through the whole back catalog.

Ashley: Well, now I'm on it and he does have stuff published in 2021. And so maybe. The column itself though is just as good as the book. Like the book is obviously curated to tell an overarching story. Whereas, you know, the weekly column is what he chooses for that week, but it's very much the same kind of tone and interesting questions. Any closing thoughts?

Amber: Yeah, I just like that. And this is what's kind of already expressed in our discussion about "How to Kiss Your Girlfriend." But I like that in all of these experiences that John Paul Brammer shares, he doesn't claim that they were all positive experiences, but he does make an effort to find value in them and to share that in a way that hopefully speaks to people in similar situations. And I like that in situations that could be something that you don't ever want to talk about or that you feel some kind of shame over,

he finds a way to learn from them and to try to pass on that, I guess, wisdom from it. And I just, I like that a lot. And I like that he does it in a way that's very approachable and fun to read. And as you mentioned, Ashley, there are some times you just have to close the book and just laugh at it for a little bit.

L: Well said.

Ashley: Yeah, we talked about the opening chapter, and then the final chapter goes back to that same question, "are you even qualified to help me?" And kind of tying into what you just said, Amber, he talks about this idea that to him, there's a time for self-help and a time for self-helplessness. And he says, "I think you need both to make it through life. Identifying where I've been helpless in life has done more good for me than maybe anything else. I used to blame myself for the bad things that happened to me. And sure, I contributed it. But I can't change those things now. I can't go back and make them not happen. I can't go back and choose correctly or in the general direction of correctness. My authority doesn't extend there. My agency doesn't extend there. I accept my helplessness there so that I might next ask myself, so what can I do?" So I really like that to conclude this collection of essays, he's expressing the importance that he has found in looking back at things and reflecting and how that may sound like a passive activity, but has been really empowering and therapeutic in a way, for him. And I realized this is something that maybe I should take his advice on because it's certainly not an easy thing to do, but worthwhile for sure. Lisa, anything to close?

L: Oh, there's a lot in there. A lot of it is familiar. I think readers are going to find parts of themselves in it. Pretty much anybody, I think, has dealt with some of these questions that he gets asked about trauma, about identity, about relationships. And he just is very real about his relationship with the past and who he is. And it's hard not to really enjoy that and respect it.

Ashley: That wraps up our discussion of *Hola Papi* by John Paul Brammer. Join us next episode as we discuss *One Last Stop* by Casey McQuiston.

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