

## *Summer Sons* 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 and my pronouns are she and her.

Annika: Hi, my name is Annika and any pronoun is fine for me. Lee Mandelo, he/they, is a writer, critic, and occasional editor whose fields of interest include speculative and queer fiction, especially when the two coincide. *Summer Sons* is their debut novel. Their other work can be found in magazines such as Tor.com, Uncanny, and Nightmare, and they have been a past nominee for various awards including The Nebula, Lambda, and Hugo. Aside from a brief stint overseas learning to speak Scouse, Lee has spent their life ranging across Kentucky, currently living in Lexington and pursuing a PhD at the University of Kentucky.

Amber: (Synopsis) Lee Mandelo's debut, *Summer Sons*, is a sweltering queer southern gothic that crosses Appalachian street racing with academic intrigue haunted by a hungry ghost. Andrew and Eddie did everything together. Best friends bonded more deeply than brothers until Eddie left Andrew behind to start his graduate program at Vanderbilt. Six months later, only days before Andrew was to join him in Nashville, Eddie dies of an apparent suicide. He leaves Andrew a horrible inheritance, a roommate he doesn't know, friends he never asked for, and a gruesome phantom that hungers for him. As Andrew searches for the truth of Eddie's death, he uncovers the lies and secrets left behind by the person he trusted most, discovering a family history soaked in blood and death. Whirling between the backstabbing academic world where Eddie spent his days and the circle of hot boys, fast cars, and hard drugs that ruled Eddie's nights, the walls Andrew has built against the world begin to crumble, and there is something awful lurking, waiting for those walls to fall. Other prominent characters are Riley, Andrew's inherited roommate, Sam Halls, Riley's cousin, West, Andrew's peer mentor at Vanderbilt, and Dr. Troth, Andrew's faculty advisor at Vanderbilt. Some content warnings. This is a horror book, so there are a lot of them: mentions of suicide, substance abuse, emotional abuse, racism, homophobia, violence, death, drugs, alcohol, possession, gore, and grief.

Annika: Alright, so yeah, that's quite the extensive list, isn't it?

Amber: Yes, it is. It's a horror book, and it really does the job.

Annika: Sure does.

Amber: Alright, what were your first impressions?

Annika: Well, the funny thing is I actually started reading this a few weeks before we were deciding what books to do, and I was kind of like, ooh, this is pretty rough. So I was like, maybe I won't sit in on this one, but why am I glad I did? Because it is way more interesting than I expected it to be. And while it is very rough on your soul, it definitely was worth the read.

Amber: So I love the description that the book description gives, the sweltering queer southern gothic, because that is what it says on the tin, and that is what you get.

Annika: Absolutely.

Amber: And the writing is so immersive and engaging that you're just sucked in the whole time. It's terrifying, as you know, Annika, because we have touched on this before. I was just losing my mind the entire time I was reading this book.

Annika: Yes. Actually, his writing style is so beautiful and so immersive. That's part of the reason why at first I was like, maybe not, because you literally feel like you are in the book with him, and maybe even inside Andrew's body. I don't know any other book that uses all the senses quite so well as this one does, because usually you get a sense of smell or hearing stuff, but this one you get all the senses, and then over top of it is just a slick of sweat.

Amber: Yes, it's a very sweaty book. It's in the description, but you're reading it, and you're just like, I feel that, and it's not pleasant.

Annika: Yes.

Amber: But yeah, it's so good. It's so spooky. The homoerotic tension in this book is unreal.

Annika: Yes!

Amber: It simmers.

Annika: Yes.

Amber: And as we've also discussed, it's just so juicy. There are so many parts of this book that I just really want to unpack.

Annika: Yes, it's like a delicious meal filled with green things that probably shouldn't be there, but it's still very filling.

Amber: Yes, green things you probably should not put in your mouth, because they might be poison.

Annika: Yes, that's true.

Amber: And as part of my notes, this is not a point that we have, but something I just want to mention as an impression. This is directed to Andrew, the character in the book. Please stop littering, skipping classes, and ignoring your emails. It stresses me out almost as much as the ghost situation.

Annika: Oh, my goodness, yes.

Amber: You are in grad school! You can't do this!

Annika: We have both been in grad school, so I feel like we feel this so deeply.

Amber: He just kept being like, I'm going to not read these 90 emails I have from my professors. I'm going to skip class and skip my meetings with my advisors. And I was like...

Annika: And then sometimes he does show up to class, and it's like, how do you even know what's going on?

Amber: Right? He seems to breeze through when he does go to class. And I'm like, how?

Annika: And his teachers are just like, eh, sure.

Amber: The only one that seems to really care is Dr. Troth, and there are a lot of really good reasons for that that I'm not going to mention at the moment, but she's the only one that seems to care.

Annika: Yes. I mean, *West* does too, kind of. Mostly because his reputation is on the line.

Amber: I think he feels obligated to. All right, so one of the things this book does, and this kind of ties into what you were saying about feeling all of the emotions and being in Andrew's body sometimes, is it deals with grief as a central part of what the main character is feeling. So do I think Eddie and Andrew's relationship and the way Andrew dealt with Eddie's death was even a little bit healthy? No, no, I do not. Everything he did, I just felt while it was happening.

Annika: Yes, this is absolutely true. Because you feel like he feels, the fact that he is the worst detective in the world—

Amber: He really is so bad.

Annika: That fact doesn't feel quite so stressful while you're reading it. You're like, oh yes, there's a murder mystery. But the fact that he's going out and doing all these other activities to get his mind off of what he's dealing with, you don't feel quite so “get on with it.”

Amber: Yes, I did feel a lot of “please stop that, you're going to kill yourself.”

Annika: Yes, there was that.

Amber: “You're going to do something that's really dangerous and you're going to die.” And I mean, yes, I was going to say, “but he was fine,” he wasn't really. He probably could have accidentally died quite a lot of times in this book.

Annika: Yeah.

Amber: But I don't want to give too much away plot lines, but once Andrew does start forming relationships that are not Eddie, obviously, and sort of figures out what to do without him eventually, on one hand, I was like, this is the most important person in your whole life. And so I felt genuinely bad for Andrew, because I mean, regardless of the nature of the relationship, he was the most important person in Andrew's life. And then he was gone. Then on the other side, I was like, wow.

Annika: The level of codependence was very high.

Amber: Oh my gosh. Dear Lord.

Annika: Yes.

Amber: And just the lack of awareness. [laughter] Anyway. The way it deals with grief is very interesting in a book like this, and also very vividly done.

Annika: Yes. And I feel like, both being mostly female, I feel like it's quintessentially a male way of dealing with grief, because there's a certain expectation of not really having deep emotions about things in the male end of society. And he certainly, like the way he acts is...

Amber: Gets very defensive and angry.

Annika: Right. Yeah. You can tell he's trying not to be emotional.

Amber: And he gets mad at people when he is emotional, and they're just like, you good? And he's like, Why would you talk to me? Don't look at me.

Annika: Yes. I think he literally says that at some point.

[laughter]

Amber: Something super interesting about this book is just the environment it's put in. And I am obsessed with the juxtaposition of academia mixed with this, I think in the description it called it, Southern Appalachian street racing, which is the other dangerous elements of that environment. They're pitted against each other so much there.

Annika: Yeah. I lived for a long time in a college town that felt kind of similar, because you have the academic section of the town, but then you also have the live-in backwoods Pennsylvania half of the town. So I felt very akin to this place, because he at one point says, "there's not quite so many places you can go where society just drops off."

Amber: Yeah.

Annika: Like you go from being in a city to being in a cow pasture in 0.5 seconds. And it really does make for a very interesting dynamic, because you have the people who are trying to end up in a better place, and then you have the other half of the town, which is people who don't believe they ever can. And it makes for quite the interesting mashup.

Amber: I really like what this book does, and without giving any plot points away. So academia is supposed to be this kind of like white tower. It's supposed to be very clean, and you're supposed to be impressed by it. But what we see in this book is the ways that it can be very subtly cutthroat, and detrimental to certain people just because of the nature of the established power structures there. One of the characters, West, has repeated issues with his academic career because he's a person of color. And they never outright say that, but when he's treated poorly, it's not taken as seriously. Vanderbilt is a well-established university. And then there's, I think it was Riley, they, Andrew describes him as a chameleon a couple of times, the way he's able to slip between like who he is as a person outside of school, and then like becoming this polished persona whenever he's in academic spaces. Academia is supposed to be this like, a place that you expect more of, that we're shown in this book has dark underbelly to it. And you also get the flip side, which is, you know, southern Appalachia, and like the wild things they do to take their mind off things and to have fun, which on the outside is extremely dangerous, and in inside is extremely dangerous. But like the people, once they make connections and decide that that person is worth protecting, they're like extremely loyal to them. And they're just very, I would say like real maybe, but like they're more supportive of like a person being their actual selves, I guess. In an environment that you look at, and you're like, that's kind of like dangerous and gritty, and I don't know about that.

Annika: Yeah, that's true.

Amber: But almost wholesome in a place that you wouldn't expect.

Annika: Right. And I love the fact that Andrew clearly chooses the latter. I mean, he's supposedly going there for the academia, but he spends so little time in the classroom. He really, really does. Yeah, he's just like, forget that, bye.

Amber: Yeah. I'm just so interested in like the way these two spaces interact with one another and like contrast with one another and the ways they're supposed to be and the ways they actually are.

Annika: Right. Yeah, you expect people to portray the academic side as the good guys, but even with the activities that they're taking part in that are somewhat illegal, I mean, they aren't bad people.

Amber: Much to think about. I'm going to think about this book for years. Anyway, alright. So in an interview Lee Mandelo did, he mentioned the oppressive aliveness of being surrounded by wood and rolling hills and how his upbringing in that kind of environment influenced his writing of the book. In my experience of reading this book, the land really does just feel alive and feel like it's a character in the story. And part of the legacy that Eddie leaves Andrew is very connected to that land.

Annika: You can sort of feel the land throughout the story grasping before him in the hot stickiness and like the feelings on the skin and the scents in his nose. It's so there that it's inescapable. And I feel like that goes along very well with the idea of the curse. It's inescapable, just like the place that it is in.

Amber: Yes. And the history of different places that Andrew goes seem to directly affect how much of a hold the curse has on him.

Annika: I also like that Riley has that sympathetic nature where he can sort of feel the history of a place. I mean, that would be utterly awful. I wouldn't want it. But just the fact that in your day-to-day life you never really think about what horrible things may have happened to a place. And since one of the places they go is a plantation, you can imagine that that's going to be not the best place for a sympathetic person to hang out. And it just feels not so much good but right that that is pointed out, that that land is not just the cursed part, but the other parts of the land can also have a feeling and a history to them.

Amber: I think part of the curse was his—this comes up very early in the book, so I don't think I'm spoiling anything—the curse has to do with ghosts and with the dead. So when he's in a place that's so affected by death and land that has historically been soaked in blood, that's why it affects him so badly and why he has less control in those places.

Annika: Especially when you're carrying around your own little guy too, your own ghost guy.

Amber: Yeah.

Annika: You can't imagine your own little pet ghosty is going to feel so great when surrounded by others. Also known as a revenant, you know.

Amber: Yeah. All right, so next I want to talk about is part of this book that drove me insane. So Eddie and Andrew's relationship and the amount of repression that Andrew has. Oh my gosh. I could not handle him. Just like the mental gymnastics this man had to do to convince himself that his relationship with his quote-unquote best friend was in any way platonic. Oh my gosh.

Annika: Right. Just he comes across as very dense because it's like you hear about his experiences with his quote-unquote best friend and you're like, "oh yeah, yeah." And they were "friends," you know.

Amber: Just guys being dudes.

Annika: Yeah, exactly.

Amber: Oh my gosh. He was talking about how they would like share spaces. He kept talking about how Eddie would touch him.

Annika: Yes.

Amber: Eddie planned. I mean, this is extremely manipulative, honestly. And it's one of the reasons I'm just like Eddie was maybe not a good person. But he planned Andrew's life to be with him.

Annika: Yes. And did it well.

Amber: He did it well. He knew Andrew well enough to plan out a bedroom that would have been perfect for him. He also left him all of his worldly possessions after he died.

Annika: Yes.

And this is not even getting into the bits about the curse, which when you read them, you'll be like, are you actually serious right now?

Annika: Right!

Amber: Oh my gosh.

Annika: Yeah, and the fact that it's mentioned that they often just would curl up in bed together.

Amber: Yes!

Annika: And just like chill. And he's still like, "oh, we're just friends."

Amber: One of the times, I think the second or third time that the revenant shows up, Andrew is very heterosexually lying in Eddie's bed. And he feels the ghost put his ankle between his legs. And he's like, oh my gosh. He wouldn't be left alone.

Annika: It's like, this is so straight.

Amber: Oh my gosh. I just could not handle it the whole time. And then he will be just like your boyfriend. He's just like, what would ever make you think?

Annika: Yeah. Why would you think that? What did he say that gave you this impression? And it's like anything.

Amber: Literally every time you open your mouth.

Annika: Yeah.

Amber: Every time.

Annika: It wasn't even Eddie giving them that impression. It was you, honey.

Amber: Yeah! OK, so there's two amazing quotes. One of them was from that same interview with Lee Mandelo, where he said “the intricate rituals boys enact to be allowed to touch one another.” I was like, those are some intricate rituals. Good gracious.

Annika: Right?

Amber: And then my absolute— Dear listener, I was reading this. And I left my office and walked up to the circulation desk to Annika. I was like, “this line!” which I will read for you now. Let's see. So, Riley is coming to check on his deeply worrisome roommate. All right. So he goes to check on Andrew. Andrew is standing in the middle of Eddie's bedroom, wearing one of Eddie's t-shirts. And he says, “for F's sake, Andrew, is there anything in this scenario that feels heterosexual or well-adjusted to you?” And I just feel like that encapsulates just the entire vibe.

Annika: Yes! It's like, that's all you have to write on the back of the book. Just that quote. Just that quote.

Amber: “Is there any part of this that seems well-adjusted or heterosexual to you?”

Annika: Yes.

Amber: No. Not a single sentence.

Annika: No. Oh, my word. Which honestly brings us into our next point, which is: no one is straight.

Amber: No one is straight! And I want to be clear. It's not just like, “he just had a very special relationship with this one person.” Every time Andrew talks to a man, I'm like, I feel like this could very, very quickly take a not unsurprising or unwarranted turn into erotica.

Annika: Absolutely. Because man, like, yeah. The amount of staring deeply at men that he does, I'm like, oh.

Amber: And just the way he notices them. He notices their skin or their muscles or their stubble or the way they're standing.

Annika: And the way they smell.

Amber: Oh, my gosh. I just.

Annika: It's like, honey, kiss one.

Amber: Please do.

Annika: Kiss one. But yeah, just the fact that really nobody is straight, including Andrew, who doesn't even realize that he's not straight. But like, there's a polyamorous couple. And I love the fact that it's kind of incidental. Like, a lot of times, polyamory is seen as a sexual thing. And while these characters have sex with each other, sure. It's not their be-all, end-all, everything. I mean, they're completely human beings in and of themselves. And I love the way they're portrayed.

Amber: Yeah. So most of these characters, I don't think I would enjoy in real life. I don't think I would. But Riley and his partners, I think I might. Right?

Annika: Everyone else is so intense. But yeah, I feel like I could have fun with those three.

Amber: Yes. But this does actually lead into our next point, which is that it is a coming out story where coming out is not the main theme.

Annika: Yes.

Amber: I mean, it does take up a lot of my attention because you're just like dying for him to see what literally everybody who talks to him sees. So I was very invested in his coming out story. But that's not what the story is about.

Annika: Right. And a lot of coming out stories worry about what other people are going to think about the character who's coming out. But this one is 100% about him coming out to himself. It's about what he thinks about it, not what anybody else thinks about it. And I felt that that was a nice fresh take because, I mean, not that long ago, all queer literature was just coming out stories because it was so new in the literature. It's nice to have a coming out story that is not the be-all end-all of the story.

Amber: Yes. I also like that when he finally got it, he was just there for it. He didn't really worry about it very much once he hit that point.

Annika: He's just like, oh, okay.

Amber: I think the one character who I will not mention because if you read this book, you will wonder which of these men he's going to sleep with.

Annika: It's true.

Amber: So it could be anyone.

Annika: Literally.

Amber: Just open the book to any page and you're just going to be like, is it this person? Anyway, I won't say who. But basically, the guy is like, "so are you good? You're not going to freak out?" And he's like, "nah."

Annika: Which is so funny because he overthinks every single thing. But that apparently is not one of them. He's such a character.

Amber: He is. So anyway, this book consumed my entire soul. Which is interesting because there is consumption of souls.

Annika: It's true.

Amber: So anyway, it consumed my entire soul while I was reading it. Yeah, that first impression that I got that it was really deep and dense.

Annika: Oh, it's so true. But it is deep and dense in a, I'd like to say delightful way, but that sounds so flippant. It's totally the wrong word.

Amber: I mean, it was a very enjoyable read. It hits your brain in a way that just sizzles. You can't stop thinking about it.

Annika: It's true, yeah. I mean, we both finished reading this days ago and I'm still thinking about little things pop into my head and I'm like, but what about that? This book is visceral, literally, and figuratively at times.

Amber: Visceral is a very good word for it.

Annika: And just the fact that you can say literally and figuratively.

Amber: Literally and figuratively.

Annika: Between that and the quote, “does any of this seem heterosexual or well-adjusted to you?” That's all you need to know.

Amber: Somebody told me they read a review that didn't think it was gay enough. And I was like, we did not read the same book.

Annika: Right? Oh my goodness. No one is straight!

Amber: I have never read a book that was more dripping with homoerotic tension.

Annika: I know, right?

Amber: Just the whole thing. I mean, this book is very good. If you're looking for a spooky read, it really does hit the spot for spooky times. It is not for the faint of heart, so just be aware of that going in. You heard that laundry list of trigger warnings at the beginning. And that it's very real. So engaging. And visceral is a really good word for it. If you're looking for a good gay, spooky read, this is an excellent choice.

Annika: Absolutely. This wraps up our discussion of *Summer Sons* by Lee Mandelo. And we'll see you next time when we discuss *Beyond the Black Door* by A.M. Strickland.

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