

Beyond the Black Door 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.



Em: My name is Em and I use they/them pronouns.

Lisa: My name is Lisa and my pronouns are she/her.

Anne: My name is Anne and my pronouns are she/her/they/them.

L: Adrian Strickland was a bibliophile who wanted to be an author before she knew what either of those words meant. She shares a home-base in Alaska with her husband, her pugs, and her piles and piles of books. She loves traveling, dancing, vests, tattoos, and every shade of teal in existence, but especially the darker ones. She is the author of *In the Ravenous Dark*, *Beyond the Black Door*, and the forthcoming *Court of the Undying Seasons*. She is represented by Hannah Bowman of Liza Dawson Associates.

E: (synopsis) *Beyond the Black Door* is a young adult dark fantasy about unlocking the mysteries around and within us, no matter the cost. Everyone has a soul. Some are beautiful gardens, others are frightening dungeons. Soulwalkers—like Kamai and her mother—can journey into other people's souls while they sleep. But no matter where Kamai visits, she sees the black door. It follows her into every soul and her mother has told her to never ever open it. When Kamai touches the door, it is warm and beating, like it has a pulse. When she puts her ear to it, she hears her own name whispered from the other side. And when tragedy strikes, Kamai does the unthinkable. She opens the door. A.M. Strickland's imaginative dark fantasy features court intrigue and romance, a main character coming to terms with her asexuality, and twists and turns as a seductive mystery unfolds that endangers not just Kamai's own soul, but the entire kingdom... That description was pulled from Adrienne Strickland's website directly. I'm going to read another quote here from Maya Gittleman at Tor.com. "Fans of the romance at the center of *Labyrinth* or *Phantom of the Opera* may enjoy the dynamic that emerges between two of the main characters in *Beyond the Black Door*. A sort of twisted love triangle emerges, no spoilers, with Razim, who holds attraction for Kamai, even though, as she emphasizes to him, despite sharing no parentage, they were raised as siblings. Ultimately, the romance allows Kamai to reclaim her own body and desire and refocus on the positive presences in her life." That's a little bit of description about the book.

A: Some content warnings to keep in mind about *Beyond the Black Door*. This work contains pleasure and sex work, toxic and coercive relationships, gender and sexual identity politics. Readers who may be triggered by any of these issues may want to take care.

E: Yeah, let's get into it. This book is pretty lore heavy, which is something that I always really appreciate, especially in a fantasy that is, I feel like there's a lot of, well, maybe I'm just consuming a lot of stories about the dream world going around right now. Like I know that Netflix just, I don't know if either of you watched *the Sandman* rendition that they did based off of Neil Gaiman's series of graphic novels. So I'm just, I love the dreamscape. I love novels about the dreamscape, stories about the dreamscape. I just think it's fascinating because from a scientific perspective, right, like there's a lot we don't know. So I really like when people fill in understandings of the soul and dreams and our brains with

fantasy that is fleshed out and has a lot of grounding. So yeah, what are your first impressions of this book?

A: That's interesting. I haven't yet seen the show, but I do love *the Sandman* series. And I hadn't even thought about the fact that there was a connection in terms of the dreamscape. I had read *Sandman* long before I ever read this. And now I'm wondering if that's part of, you know, when I first came into it, I'm like, oh, I know what this is. You know, it's like a, there's a kind of familiarity to the world system that might be partly the idea of the dreaming that I hadn't really thought about. Because when I first read it, you know, I, I identify as asexual myself, you know, and I'm always looking for legitimate asexual things. You know, when I first read it, I was like, this feels very familiar, but at the same time, not. For me, there was a lot of resistance, I think, especially to the way that she kept, you know, saying, "I'm not normal. What's wrong with me?" And part of me was just like, like, I get that entire idea that your dreams can be a nightmare. That was my first reaction when I first started reading it. Somebody had recommended it to me as being very authentically asexual. And I was like, I, let me be the judge of that, you know, but yeah, it really resonated with me.

E: Yeah, thanks, Anne. I really appreciate that. Yeah, I saw a lot of, at least in the very tangentially related way of how the dreaming is portrayed in *Sandman* and how sort of like the soul home is portrayed or the concept of Nehym in this novel is portrayed. I could be pronouncing that wrong. I was reading it as Nehym. It's N-E-H-Y-M. This concept, that word means "soul home" within the lore. And so everyone has a soul home and it could look differently depending on, you know, whose soul it is. Yeah, that concept of our subconscious being a physical place and a main character feeling—something that we learned very early on is Khmer doesn't have a Nehym. She doesn't have a soul home. And so that's something that, you know, everybody else has one. So she is very othered right from the get go. And that's something that, you know, creates a pretty big point of tension for her that carries throughout the course of the novel as she tries to figure her personhood out within not only just being herself and, you know, an asexual person within this family of—and we'll get into their family dynamic a little bit more. Because that's really, you know, an interesting, compelling thing that moves the story forward. But not just within, you know, her own personhood within her family and the way that her family works, but also just as a person within the greater world, not having a soul home. Like, what does that mean? Why?

L: I really enjoyed the lore and the world building of the novel. Beyond the idea of a soul home, there's the whole lore of the gods and how that world was created by night and day or sun and moon and their child, the earth, that they call Ranta, and how they keep the darkness at bay. It was very compelling. It was very new, even though it draws clearly on a lot of existing lore. It wasn't something I'd encountered in fiction before, and I really liked it. And the different ways that people sort of align their personalities or their careers with, you know, either Tain, the sun god, or Heshara, the moon goddess, or Ranta, the earth goddess. But there is also a lot of very, like, earthbound politics with that as well, with the king who is the protector of the earth goddess. And when one of the characters starts talking about, like, "well, isn't it convenient that the king doesn't have an actual female queen that he answers to," even though he is, you know, by tradition married to the earth? So I thought that was fantastic, that a lot of imagination and thought went into that. The idea of the soul home is just, it's fascinating, but it's also a little frightening because they set up this world where there's, you know, the powers that be are authorized to walk into your soul. So there is no hiding anything from them. They know you're keeping secrets. If you've committed a crime, anything, they are able to find out, which is pretty terrifying if you think about it.

E: Yeah, I'm really interested in fantasy stories lately where the reigning powers that be are sort of theocratic in the sense that everybody kind of ascribes to the same theocratic beliefs and there's not a whole lot of conflict there. But that does provide certain assurances to the government, right, and to the people under that government. Yeah, that's a really interesting point that you bring up, Lisa, is like, that's something we sort of haven't talked about is the fact that Kamai and her mother, they can soul walk, but

not everybody can. The realm of souls is this specific place for Heshara, the moon goddess. The plane of the souls is just for Heshara to walk and for the priests and the priestesses, people in government. And so that's a really interesting aspect of Kamai's being it's something that she can do that not everyone can do. And so that provides, you know, she quite literally walks in this world in a way that not everyone is able to. And that provides her certain avenues for not only capital gain, but also sociopolitical gain. And Lisa, like you said, there's a lot of political intrigue in this book, which I love. I recently read a book called *The Bone Orchard*, which was kind of similar, sort of fantasy-ish vibe, where again, like the government is very theocratic and it's all conflict going on. But the main character isn't directly involved in the larger conflict that's happening, but they are affected by it. And they have these special abilities that put them right in the middle of it. That was a really great book. I really liked this book too, for that same reason. I love fantasy politics when it has to do with how the magic works in the world and who gets to use it and why. And I think this book does that in a really interesting way that, yeah, I appreciated. I thought it was cool. Let's talk about some of the characters in this book. Obviously, our main character is Kamai. And I want to read another excerpt from that Tor.com article that I mentioned earlier by Maya Gittelman about this book. "*Beyond the Black Door* is substantially queer-normative, with multiple characters expressing gay or queer desire. And Kamai's sex-repulsed asexuality is explored on the page. I don't share this identity, though the author does, so I cannot speak authoritatively to the depiction. For this particular narrative, that means that Kamai does manifest internalized acephobia, which comes up as a significant plot point when she's asked to perform pleasure artistry for the sake of soul walking. Her acephobia is also eventually checked on the page, but asexual readers may want to be aware that this is pervasive. And before she confronts it, and she does, she conflates it with her perceived lack of a soul home. The asexual and specific transgender experiences explored in this novel are not mine, but they are valid. As Strickland has mentioned themselves, some readers may find the renderings of these experiences uncomfortable, and some may find them helpful and vindicating. All the queer and trans narratives are ultimately well received within the context of the novel. The plot is complex and the pacing is ambitious. *Beyond the Black Door* is at once a twisty atmospheric dark fantasy built on rich mythology as well as an emotional story of coming into one's own identity and power." I think it really puts a lot of excellent context behind Kamai as a character and sort of some of the things, again, in talking about trigger warnings, some of the things that readers might face within this particular story and looking at Kamai's understanding of herself within this world as an asexual person who is the child of—Her mother is a pleasure worker, the courtesan. So that's how she makes a lot of her money is not only through pleasure work, but also through the political intrigue of being a soul walker and being able to enter the dreams of these people that she is laying with and sharing her bed with. Again, a little context for Kamai in terms of being an asexual person, directly related to someone who is a sex worker and what that means for her and as she tries to grapple with that. And also within the context of being a person in this world who doesn't have a soul home but can soul walk. Just mentioned Kamai, but I want to mention some of the other main characters here for a second too. Razim is Kami's stepbrother. Maureen and Halon are Kami's mother and stepfather. And then the Twilight Guild, which is sort of a secretive, shady, mysterious organization that Maureen and Halon work for as pleasure workers.

A: This is like really hard. A lot of the characters that I would kind of like to talk about, they show up not that late in, but that would probably be giving stuff away. Because I feel like there's a number of characters that show up about a third of the way into the book where I'm like, oh yeah, Razim. Well, even in things you find out about these characters, we're giving stuff away, right? What am I going to say about Razim? That's a complex character. You know, when I think about her brother and not her brother, but he's basically like her brother, right? Like they were raised together and their interesting relationship and his interesting relationship to her and how that relates to her identity. It's sort of like, wow, I don't even know what to say about that. I start out like I feel like I'm supposed to hate him, but I don't hate him. You hate him because you think that he's responsible for what happens to her family. And also because of his relationship to her. And I think that he's a little bit confused about what's expected of him. And he definitely doesn't understand her asexuality at all. And even in that, I feel like, I want to say

he's not a bad person. He's just very confused. And I get that vibe from him pretty early on in the story. I think we're supposed to get that vibe that her struggling with her family is part of what she's dealing with. Not quite sure what to do with it. And with her mom too, she's angry and frustrated at her mom. But at the same time, you get this feeling like the mom knows stuff that she doesn't know. And the same thing with her stepfather is also, it's very complicated, isn't it? It's a very complicated relationship. And at the start, you don't really know where it's going to go with these people. Because they're like, in the Twilight Guild, you're like, are they the good guys or the bad guys? The story has a lot of twists and turns where you think you know what's happening. And then it's like, oh, I'm not, now I'm not sure anymore. But the Twilight Guild was a secret group, I guess, that her mother and Halan belong to. That may or may not have resulted in their death. Find out more about that as the story goes on.

L: As far as Razim, it's interesting how they are, like right from the start, Kamai's mother warns her, never walk in Razim's soul home. She keeps them physically distanced, which is partially so that she can't soul walk. Their physical proximity is necessary for that. And at one point tells her not to trust him. And sets up this antagonism that is really so much more complex than Kamai understands at first. And I was frustrated with Maureen for, there's so many secrets. I mean, the whole book is about secrets and what's behind the door. And that's a recurring theme. And her mother would just reveal a little bit here and a little bit there. And Kamai is making decisions as best she can with what she knows. But there's so much she doesn't know. And she keeps bumping into this person or having this experience and learning a little bit more. I think the story teases out that mystery very well. But it did create a lot of frustration for me. It's just like, why wouldn't you tell your daughter about this?

E: That's always the worst in fantasy stories. When parents, they feel they are capable, they feel that they are protecting their children. But you as the reader think, oh my God, your child would be so much better off if you just let them in, and treated them like an adult, and gave them the information that you are so desperately trying to keep from them. To some degree. I love family relationship books. And this is definitely one of those things where it's like the relationships between the characters change. I wouldn't say drastically. But they definitely change from the beginning to the end. And as you get more information, you understand people's motivations a little bit more. And you're filled in more about some of these decisions that you might otherwise think are maybe even out of character. Or just really nasty or just confusing. I really appreciated the nuance that this book had in terms of the relationships and the world, and how the lore really informed the way that the characters moved and behaved with one another. Like the soul house. And speaking of the lore, I do want to talk a little bit about our deities here. I want to quickly go over, again, Ranta, the earth goddess, who is queen of the earth. She's daughter of Tain and Heshara. Who are the sun and the moon goddess respectively. And this is again from Tor.com. "The mythology of Tain and Heshara governs this world. And soul walking itself is a gift from Heshara. The story goes that Tain and Heshara spent their existence fleeing the darkness until they had Ranta. They made a home for their child and now spend every day circling her to keep the darkness at bay. So Ranta rules the earth as queen in essence. In practice, this means that every king who rises to power must pledge a sacred oath to the earth goddess, and then he may rule as he pleases. Furthermore, he needs to produce heirs. So he marries a human woman who becomes his queen consort." The way that gender works in this world, I think, is kind of interesting because of this, right? The way that the lore informs the sociopolitical structure of how people move and operate. And Lisa, you mentioned this a little bit earlier. Just this idea of a king who is technically, in essence, married to the queen goddess, but he can basically do whatever he wants. And the idea of being a queen consort is a very sought-after position in society. Or not so, depending on who is the king. And so I kind of wanted to talk about that a little bit more and see if you guys had any thoughts about that aspect of this novel.

L: I think it's really interesting that it is a monotheistic society. Everyone pretty much just accepts this is all true. But the priests and priestesses, of course, have a higher or more complex knowledge of the lore and the understanding of the deities. And me reading it through the lens of a modern person is like, well,

I'm not taking it for granted that any of this is true. You do find out, a little bit at a time, not that it isn't true, but that it is. And that's reflected in, well, I'll say it's very relevant to what's happening with the main character and in her life.

A: Yeah, it's interesting, isn't it? That I feel like one of the major plot developments is finding out this religion and there's a reality to it. And at the same time, there's also a political dimension that is sort of different from the reality of it. And I feel like there's social commentary going on there where there's like a difference between being genuine and being, I'm thinking like somebody who's sort of like a hangers-on to power.

E: Someone who rides someone else's coattails.

A: Yeah, it's very interesting, isn't it? Oh, wow. Yeah. I mean, in that whole idea of the Nehym and the soul and the people who can walk in there, I feel like there's some kind of commentary going on sort of balancing the mystical and the individual versus the political. I don't know. It raises a lot of interesting questions.

E: No, absolutely. And just the idea that certain people, priestesses and priestesses of Heshara are allowed to be awake in the soul walking realm sometimes. But otherwise, you can't go there. People don't see their soul homes. From what I understand, regular people can't visit their soul home. So you might go your whole life and not even know what it looks like. And the priests and the priestesses of Heshara do, which is a really interesting concept from a sociopolitical standpoint, having this whole aspect of yourself that is yours, it's your soul home, and not being able to go there or see that. And Kamai having this ability to walk in people in that way, but not having that place for herself. It's an interesting world that we find ourselves in. And Kamai is uniquely positioned in this world. And it's fascinating lore applied to a governmental and political system, I guess. I

L: I thought it was a little unclear if people are completely unaware of their own soul home. It mostly seemed like that. But there was the one point where Kamai is young and she's practicing soul walking on a wealthy neighbor of hers and visits their soul, and it's very humble, and she says that she thinks that the neighbor must be compensating for their humble soul with their big earthly mansion. So that was a little bit like, oh, so is it that the neighbor is aware of their soul? Or maybe they just sort of feel that kind of smallness and humbleness in themselves. At one point, much, much later in the book, when we learn a lot more, there's some talking about how who you are influences what your soul home looks like and vice versa.

A: There's another one of those interesting things that she could get in trouble if people found out that she could walk in their souls without being a priest or a priestess. And that was interesting because in terms of the political power involved in that, there's a certain element of wanting to own people's souls, you know, wanting to own people. That was, again, that's just probably social commentary to me. There's some people who are like, "we want to control the space. If I can't control the space, then the space doesn't exist." And that was also really, really interesting when you think about the fact that each of us have this private space inside of us that other people might want to be able to get in there and sort of root around, you know, because I feel like there are certain political figures, I'll say, people of power in the world, who do kind of seem to want to root around people's souls, right? They kind of want to tell us what to think and what to say. And they want to say, "oh, I think I know why you're doing this." And it's like, well, not really. And they might like to have somebody who could literally go in there and like, oh, OK, you know. And you're right, it is kind of creepy. I hadn't really thought about it quite that way before. So to me, the parallels.

E: Yeah, it's that Orwellian thought police, right? The dystopian people who are able to get into your brain type idea in a fantasy setting. It's always an interesting dynamic to play with. And I think that Strickland does it in a way that is fun and funky and fresh from a reading perspective. I want to talk about the Black Door itself, because we haven't talked about the Black Door. We can't really talk very much about it because it is, you know, big, bad spoilers. And we don't try to spoil too much on this podcast.

A: I feel like I had an idea about what the Black Door was from the beginning. And I was right. I like that feeling, you know, when you get there, you're like, I had a feeling about that. I won't say anything else. But anyway, that's right.

E: You've just read so many books that you could tell. You just knew where it was going.

A: You know.

L: As a plot device, it didn't draw me in. You know, this great secret that Kami just cannot help but keep going back to, despite the fact that it was forbidden. I thought the first part of that didn't flow very well. But, you know, we needed that secret and we needed what is behind the Black Door. So it got us where we needed to go.

E: Yeah, I agree. It's one of those things where it's like, oh, what's it called? Chekhov's gun, right? Like, if you see the Black Door in the first act of the book, the Black Door is going to be opened by the third act of the book, right? And it's probably going to be, you know, used in a way that you think is how it's going to be used. But it's still something that moves the story and gets things going. And also makes for a cool cover. I really like the cover art of this book. Obviously, it's, you know, it's sort of a keyhole, right? Door imagery is always kind of fun, you know? Think about the metaphor of different stuff on one side or the other side. Anyway, I'm not going to try to philosophize about anything.

L: One of the things that stood out to me, and I don't know, I wasn't sure if this got too far into spoiler territory. But when Kamia is struggling with her asexuality and she's trying to hide it, at some point when she talks to more of a parental figure who brings out this, for lack of a better word, like a star chart. And shows her, like, well, you're here on this continuum and you're here on this continuum and this is completely normal. You know, there's even a name for what you are. And it was interesting to me the way the lore or the world connected soul and sexuality or gender identity or even, you know, romantic feelings together. Because I personally don't feel— like, my soul doesn't have anything to do with that. But in this book, they're very heavily intertwined. And even further on in the book, you find out about the way souls relate to each other and how that influences the way people relate to each other in the real world. It was an interesting metaphor. And I feel like I'd like to explore that idea more in this world.

E: Yeah, thanks, Lisa. That's really, that's, there's so much to think about. There's so much to think about with this book. Every time each of you says something, I'm like, oh, I hadn't thought about that. So one of those ones that I think will be fun on a reread also. I feel like you could get a lot more a second time around with this one.

L: That wraps up our discussion of *Beyond the Black Door* by A.M. Strickland. Join us next episode as we cover *Spoiler Alert! The Hero Dies* by Michael Ausiello.

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