

Spoiler Alert: the Hero Dies 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.



Lizzie: My name is Lizzie and my pronouns are she and her.

Em: My name is Em and my pronouns are they/them.

Michael: My name is Michael and my pronouns are he/him.

L: Michael Asiello is the founder and editor-in-chief of TV Line, a television entertainment website owned by Penske Media that launched in 2010. Asiello began his publishing career in 1997 at *Soaps in Depth* before moving on to *TV Guide* in 2000, where he debuted his signature spoiler-tinged Ask Asiello column and established himself as a major player in the world of TV journalism. In 2008, he jumped to *Entertainment Weekly*, where he penned a column in the magazine, as well as an award-winning blog. He currently splits his time between New York City and Los Angeles. *Spoiler Alert: The Hero Dies* is his only book.

E: For the past decade, TV fans of all stripes have counted upon Michael Asiello's insider knowledge to get the scoop on their favorite shows and stars. From his time at *Soaps in Depth* to his influential stints at *TV Guide* and *Entertainment Weekly* to his current role as founder and editor-in-chief of the wildly popular website *TVLine.com*, Michael has established himself as the go-to expert when it comes to our most popular form of entertainment. What many of his fans don't know, however, is that while his professional life was in full swing, Michael had to endure the greatest of personal tragedies. His husband, Kit Cowan, was diagnosed with a rare and very aggressive form of neuroendocrine cancer. Over the course of 11 months, Kit and Michael did their best to combat the deadly disease, but Kit succumbed to his illness in February of 2015. In this heartbreaking and darkly hilarious memoir, Michael tells the story of his harrowing and challenging last year with Kit, while revisiting the 13 years that preceded it, and how the undeniably powerful bond between him and Kit carried them through all manner of difficulty, always with laughter front and center in their relationship. Instead of a tale of sadness and loss, *Spoiler Alert: The Hero Dies* is an unforgettable, inspiring, and beautiful testament to the resilience and strength of true love.

L: Content warnings for our listeners include death, cancer, medical treatment, and homophobia. Okay, hi Michael. We're gonna get into it. First impressions from me and Em. Em cried in my office.

E: Yeah, this is a difficult thing to talk about, and as I've been talking to other people about experiencing this book, and reading through the story, and sort of processing through the sadness, and that's secondhand sadness, we kind of had to sit down and say like, how are we going to talk about this book? Especially with you being here, Michael. It's really very surreal. Yeah, it's a very sad book, but it's simultaneously a very touching, funny book, and just such a testament to Kit's strength and resilience. I think I'm going to be thinking about this book for a very long time. I'm getting emotional. I'm going to try not to. I'm really trying. It's like...

M: Pull it together. Pull it together. We've got a long show ahead of us.

E: I know. I know. I know. Unprofessional.

L: Oh, I should mention, this episode is very special, because it's our first author interview with Michael Asiello, and he's verified at Instagram, which means he's a celebrity. I mention this because I told all my coworkers, and they were like, okay. But I was like, what do you mean? He's got the blue checkmark. And I'm sure that means so little to you, Michael, as well.

M: Celebrity in the loosest sense of the word.

L: It's very cool. Anyway, so my first impressions are the same. I had to read this book in chunks, especially when we got to the Millersburg parts, because, I mean, I work in Millersburg. The Johnson Library is my turf. So I was just like, "oh my God, oh my God." And I got really excited, and then I got sad, and then I put it down. But it was really good, obviously. But we chose this book very specifically, because the subject of the book, Kit Callen, he was from Millersburg, Pennsylvania, which is home to one of our branches, the Johnson Memorial Library, which is one of my libraries, like I said. So we have a very hometown connection to this book. And one of my staff went to high school with Kit. We were talking today. She was just a year behind him.

E: So I have a couple of passages here that I took from chapter seven of *Spoiler Alert*, for context for anybody reading the book or anybody not reading the book and wanting to find this beautiful passage about Kit and his relationship to Millersburg, his hometown. This passage of the book comes when Michael and Kit are traveling back to Millersburg to let Kit's parents know of his diagnosis and also, surprise, they got married, I think we'll talk a little bit more about that later, sort of just the juxtaposition of this incredible love and happiness and also sadness that is the 11 months we cover in this book. Back to this passage that I want to read. This is Kit and Michael traveling back to Millersburg. "Kit had a love-hate relationship with his hometown. Like an ex he could never quite get over, Millersburg simultaneously captivated and haunted him. There was always a tinge of pride in his voice when he described its smallness vis-a-vis his customary, 'it doesn't have a single traffic light.' I always read it as, 'yep, I grew up in the middle of nowhere and I got out.' For Millersburg and its modest size was the root of a lot of angst. Being different, gay, artsy, font-obsessed in small-town 80s America had its challenges. 'There are no secrets in Millersburg,' Kit often lamented to me. 'Everyone knows everyone.' But as he got older and his life got bigger, Millersburg's diminutiveness became its biggest selling point in his eyes and it was what drew him back. As we entered Millersburg, the markers started hitting us rapid fire. There was a Susquehanna riverbank at which he spent many a summer searching for curious-looking rocks and signs of wildlife with his friend Jen, not to be confused with his Florida-based BFF, also named Jen. There was a secret spot under the bridge trestle where he would hang out with his then-best friend Scotty, the post office trash can that he saw as a treasure chest, for inside it there were often discarded catalogs full of shiny new things to covet. The Five and Dime, now a beauty parlor, he visited every day after school to buy candy with the money he made returning his classmate's lunch trays. He charged a dime, which, not so coincidentally, was exactly the amount of change that was left after they paid for their 90-cent meals. The restaurant at the Millersburger Hotel where he worked as a host. The CVS where he took a job as cashier/candy aisle stock boy to pay back his dad after he wrecked their car. He proudly proclaimed that it was the most stunningly staged and curated candy aisle CVS had ever seen. His grandmother's house, the site of many of backyard fish fry. Kit's childhood home, the left side of a duplex house which his parents still owned and rented out. And lastly, his parents' current home." In my reading of this book, obviously, there's a lot of little bits here and there talking about Kit's love for Millersburg and there are also some beautiful passages about just kind of northern Pennsylvania and what Kit loved about it. I think those passages really encapsulate sort of Kit's connection and love for this place. I know Lizzie wants to talk about...

L: Oh yes, I'd just like to mention the Kit Cowan Archives. If you Google Kit Cowan Archives, you'll find a collection of pictures that Kit took on his final walk around Millersburg as well as the first passage that Em read which, when I read it for the first time, brought me to tears in my office and I was like, oh my God, look at these places that I have seen and just thinking about what it meant to him, it was beautiful. So I would just like to throw that out there that everybody should check that out and then cry like I did. So we actually do have a question. The Millersburg that Kit grew up in in the 80s is a different Millersburg than the one that exists today. Millersburg High School now has a GSA, their library has those pride displays and like we're doing now, we have a podcast by and about the LGBTQ community. And so I'd like to ask, how do you think this change within the local culture might be reflected in the young gay men growing up in the area today? Like knowing Kit and knowing what he experienced growing up and this change, what do you think that means?

M: Well, I think it means that we've come a long way as a society since the 80s, more visibility. I think one of the things that was really lacking when Kit grew up and when I grew up in the 80s was a lack of role models in pop culture. People that we can look up to, people whose lives we can point to and say, "that's like me, that's who I want to be." I think the absence of gay role models just has a really isolating effect on someone, particularly someone growing up in a small town. I also grew up in a small town, not as small as Millersburg. I was only 15 miles outside of New York City, but still a small town in New Jersey can feel very isolating in and of itself. And to a certain degree, I can relate to that sense of loneliness and isolation and fear. But we're in a world now with the internet and social media and movies and television. LGBTQ+ characters are no longer just sort of the comic relief sidekicks. They're fully fleshed out characters and they're complicated and they are flawed. They are human. And I think that's made the world an easier place for LGBTQ+ people to live and a safer place.

E: Yeah, thank you. Along the lines of having role models that are more visible, I think, and forgive me if this is towing the line of ass-kissory, but I would say that you and Kit are, I think, very important queer role models, especially within the context of this story. There is so much commitment to one another in this, to be able to tell this kind of story and to be able to talk about this kind of story and to outline that sort of intimacy and togetherness and real true love is, I think there's something to be said there, not maybe having had the ability to do that even 10 years ago. Going off of having queer representation and role models who are very human and real, this is obviously a very personal memoir, one that deals very intimately with your personal experiences with grief, loss, and the resulting trauma that comes with those things. It's very humanizing. I was wondering if you would talk to us about your process for writing this book in terms of self-care, because I can only imagine that delving back into a lot of these memories was very difficult for you. I was thinking while I was reading this, how would I feel if I had to sit down and try to remember this pain, especially after, time-wise, I don't think it's been very long between his passing and the writing of this book. So how did you cope with dredging up the painful past through writing and on through the process of recording your own audio book? Because I listened to the recording. It was excellent. Please talk to us a little bit about that if you're willing.

M: I really appreciate the question because one of the things that people assumed was, and they assumed this through their question, because I got this a lot, was writing this book therapeutic. And it wasn't. At least I don't think it was. It was masochistic in a way because I started just a couple months after Kit had died. And the reason for that is once the opportunity was presented and I decided I was going to take on this challenge, I didn't trust my ability to remember and retain the specific details of those 11 months. And I knew if I was going to do this book, if I was going to do this story justice, it was going to live and die by my ability to recall the very specific details, including conversations that happened. So I knew it was now or never. I couldn't put this off for two years until after I was finished the first stage of my grieving and then dive into it. I had to dive into it while I was fully in grief and mourning. And it was very difficult. And I think it helped that I only wrote on weekends because I still was maintaining a full-time job at TVLine and I kept those two buckets very separate. So I would work at TVLine Monday

through Friday and then Saturday would come around, and that was when I would work on the book, Saturday and Sunday. And it was hard. It was hard bringing myself, because in order to tell the stories and the chapters that focused on his illness, I had to put myself very much back in the moment, in some really difficult, hard moments, and relive them. And it was excruciating. And as far as self-care, I did a lot of walking, a lot of exercise. I talked to friends. I did some retail therapy. I bought a lot of stuff that I didn't need. I bought a lot of Smurfs on eBay that I didn't need. And that only makes sense for people who have read the book and know me. It was a combination of things, but it was hard. It was not easy. Ultimately though, it was absolutely 100% worth it, because I think the book works in many ways because I was able to recall the little details, the small moments throughout the story.

E: And I think that you talking about kind of just tackling it head-on really carries in the book. That actually sort of leads into the next thing I wanted to talk about, just sort of like your character through the novel and your tenacity and your drive to not only tell Kit's story and the story of his fight through the novel, but also to care for him and advocate for his medical care. So I wrote, this is as much a story about Kit's fight with cancer as it is about your own resilience as a partner and husband. I want to read a little excerpt from chapter eight that really struck me. You and Kit have arrived for his first chemo treatment to find that the nurses haven't prepared a bed for Kit as promised, and you've taken it upon yourself to advocate for his care. So the specifics of Kit's cancer are that he can't sit for lengthy periods of time because of the location of the tumor that he's suffering from. And so here's the excerpt from the book. "As Kit took off his shoes and got settled into that beautiful, gorgeous, sumptuous bed, I took a moment to savor the victory. While the events of the past three weeks had clearly foreshadowed the hands-on role I would take in Kit's medical care, this morning's chair-gate brouhaha had firmly established how I would tackle my job as a caregiver, ferociously, passionately, and with zero tolerance for bullshit. And it felt good. It felt good to fight for something without worrying about my emotions getting the best of me, or how I'd be perceived, or what the possible blowback would be. It felt good to love someone so much that literally nothing was as important as making sure that person was safe and comfortable and protected." And that passage, again, really speaks to me about that drive that you so clearly possess, at least in my eyes, to care for Kit, and then also hearing you explain sort of battling your own pain to make sure that Kit's story was told accurately and with great detail. I think that really speaks to your love for him and your drive to get this story told. It's hard to get through, like Lizzie mentioned, I had to read this in chunks as well, but it's so worth it. It's so worth it. It's very sad, but it is worth it to see that love and to see that drive. And so, obviously, I'm just a little library employee, but I really commend you for that and for tackling this story and telling the story the way that you have.

M: Well, you know, a part of this story is about the medical care he received. This was a very rare cancer. It was rectal cancer, but it was a neuroendocrine tumor, and it was a very rare high-grade neuroendocrine tumor. So even though we were at Sloan Kettering, which is the Holy Grail of cancer medical centers in the world, this was an outlier, even for them. And as a result of that, there was a lot of trial and error, and that's a really scary position to be in when you're the one receiving the medical care, when you have a sense that the experts don't fully understand doing. It's a terrifying thing. So I tried to step in where I could and mitigate some of that fear for him and control the things that I could control, like getting him a bed versus a reclining chair. That would have been very uncomfortable for him. And when those opportunities arose, when I felt like I had the power to step in and make a difference in his care, I did it, and it was instinctual. And it all came from love. It all came from, I would do anything for this human being. And what a gift that is. What a gift to feel such love for another human being that it is a matter of instinct to protect them and to fight for them and to advocate for them. And that's not something I take for granted. I mean, that's, you know, it's all really painful, but it all just comes from a place of profound love. And I'm so grateful that I found someone that I felt that way toward.

E: Yeah, thank you. Sorry. I'm really grateful that we've gotten the opportunity to read about that. Again, it's not the most ideal circumstances, right? Anything but. Having the opportunity to, you know, read that story. Thank you for, thank you.

L: Your book is being made or has been made into a movie. How has it been to watch actors, Jim Parsons, play out scenes that really happened to you? Scenes that I'm sure are extremely vivid in your memory in some instances. And how does it feel to be played by Jim Parsons? Tell us everything.

M: First, let me say the movie comes out Friday, December 2nd, and it's gonna play initially in limited release in New York, LA, and San Francisco. And then subsequent two weekends, it's gonna expand nationwide. So by December 16th, it should be at a theater near you, even if you live in a place like Millersburg, Pennsylvania.

L: The Colony Theater, everyone.

M: I don't know that it will be playing at the Colony, but it should at the very least be playing in Harrisburg. It was an incredible process. It was an incredible learning experience. It was, you know, so much of it was a "pinch me, I can't believe this is happening." I think first and foremost, working with Jim, not just as him playing me, but he's a producer on the movie. He optioned my book. It started right with him. I had asked him to, because we had known each other through my job of covering television and him being a huge TV star. We had a really nice rapport on red carpets and whenever we would do sit-down interviews. And I knew he was a gay man. And when I was looking for someone to moderate my Q&A during my book tour out here in Los Angeles, I reached out to him and without even reading the book, he said yes. And then he read the book and became, you know, very interested in his company optioning it and him and his husband both were very much interested in doing that. And, you know, here we are now four years later and these coming out and it's incredible. I mean, one thing I learned throughout this process is that it's so hard to get a movie made, so hard to get a movie made. And the fact that we not only got it made, but got it made four or five years after the book came out is almost a miracle. And the fact that we made a movie that I'm proud of is even more of a miracle, you know, because it's just so hard to make it, make a movie, make a good movie, make a movie you're proud of. Anyway, we have an incredible director, Michael Showalter, who directed a similarly themed movie, *The Big Sick*. I don't know if you're familiar with that.

E: Okay, yeah.

M: Yeah. But he's also done a bunch of movies since then, including most recently, *The Eyes of Tammy Faye*, which won Jessica Chastain an Oscar. He's an incredible director, incredibly collaborative director. It's not typical. I think that the writer of the source material is allowed into the process as deep and as consistently as I was. And that's another thing that I was very grateful for. It was also something upfront that I said, I wasn't going to sell the rights to the book and then step away and let someone else, and just relinquish control. I was always going to be involved, heavily involved. But, you know, there are limits to, you know, how involved you can be because ultimately there is a director and the director is the boss. It was a process of letting go and trusting someone else to tell my story. But what an incredible group to hand this over to, you know, Michael and Jim and their teams just were incredibly collaborative and also incredibly respectful to me and to Kit and to this story. And from day one, we were always on the same page that, you know, this is a love story. And that's the story that they wanted to tell. And that is the story that they ultimately told. And I'm really proud of it. That's also to say that it's incredibly surreal sitting on the set and watching Jim Parsons play you. And, you know, we had an excellent actor, Ben Aldridge, playing Kit. And it was very surreal, but in a good way. There were a couple hard days on the set, like hard scenes, watching and shooting. But more than anything, it was just, I felt incredibly lucky to be in this position and to have people respond to the book in the way that they

did and to want to make a movie about it. You know, so a lot of those surreal moments were really just moments of like, “this is so cool,” you know, because it really was. And I, it was a window into a world, you know, I have covered entertainment for most of my career, but I've never been on this side of it, you know, the other side. And I just, I learned so much and it was so exciting. I can't wait for everyone to see the movie.

L: We're excited.

E: What would you hope that people reading this book or seeing this film take from the narrative, from the experience? If nothing else, what would you hope that people get out of your story and of Kit's story? Sorry, that's maybe a silly question.

M: I think, you know, I hesitate sometimes to want to project onto anyone else what I would want them to take out of it. But I think what I can say is one of the most rewarding pieces of feedback that I get from the book are from straight people who have read it and said that my relationship with Kit resembled their relationship with their husband or wife and that there was no difference, gay or straight, like we are all the same. We all love and we are all, you know, sort of fighting, we all have the same kind of fights and there's really no difference. And so, you know, for a straight couple to have read it and say, “I feel seen, like I feel like your relationship was like my relationship.” That's really rewarding because at the end of the day, that's really all we're fighting for as queer people is to be treated equally and we're still fighting for that. So that's, that's one thing I hope maybe people take away from it is just watching it and feeling that they could relate to it, relate to the love story, relate to the relationship, regardless of your sexual orientation.

L: Yeah. I have one really hard-hitting question. How is your Smurf collection coming along?

M: So the Smurf collection is out of control. It's an, it's an obsession. It's probably at this point, not healthy in any way, but it's actually, you know, as I said, when I was writing the book, I was buying Smurfs on eBay as sort of retail therapy. And I still do that. Like I still find something comforting, you know, because the collecting started when I was young, when I was a kid, and there's a nostalgic pull about it and it's comforting, it's soothing. Actually, the act of procuring pieces of the collection is what to me is the most satisfying and fun. You know, receiving them in the mail and opening them as fun, but really it's the thrill of the hunt and it's the finding something that maybe I don't have or something that I want duplicates of. Going onto eBay and just, you know, it brings me to like a calm, happy place. And the result of that is I just have a ton of Smurfs and some of them are here at my place in LA. Some of them are storage in New York. They're sort of scattered all over the place. I think my endgame for this is to, I touch on this in the book a little bit, is to open a shop, open a vintage toy store that maybe doesn't just sell Smurfs, but there's a big Smurfs section and then just sort of enjoying the experience of seeing other people take pieces of my collection and seeing sort of the collection live on through other people. And I think that's sort of, that's my retirement plan anyway. I don't know that it's going to be a particularly lucrative one, but that's my retirement plan.

L: It should be noted, listeners, that Michael is wearing a Smurf shirt for this interview, which I really appreciate. I also really appreciate that you took my really silly question and you made it really beautiful. So thank you for that answer.

E: I also very much relate to the thrill of the search and the hunt for a new collectible. I'm really into blind box figurines. So they'll put out like a series of, they'll put out like a different set of them and there'll be like six or seven in a set and you buy the box and you don't know which one is in the box unless you order like special on AliExpress or eBay, which I have done a couple of—like, I get it.

M: That's no fun. That takes the fun out of it.

E: Exactly. So I don't always do it, but then you buy like three or four and you get a duplicate and you're pissed because you just spent all this money and you got two of the same one. Anyway.

M: No, it's the thrill of the hunt. Like I was antiquing with my friend Holly out here in LA over the weekend. And one thing I always tell her because she sort of breezes through the antique stores and the antique malls, but she's like 10 steps ahead of me. And I always tell her, "if you see a Smurf, do not say anything to me. I want to find it on my own." And of course, she completely disregarded that rule again this weekend. And she's like, before I even made it like 10 steps in, she's like, "oh my God, did you see the Smurf glasses?" And I'm like, "what did I tell you?" And I like stumbling on it. Like I love sort of finding the needle in a haystack. And a lot of times finding Smurf stuff in a sort of a general antique store is like finding a needle in a haystack. It's not the most typical thing that you see. Now, nine times out of 10, the thing that I will stumble on or find is something I already have, or it's something that's not in good condition or they're asking a ridiculous amount of money for it. And that's another thing about Smurfs, like people don't really have a sense of maybe what Smurfs are worth. There are some that are worth a lot. Generally speaking, they're not Star Wars figures. You know, they're not as highly collectible. Although I think maybe as a result of this book, maybe they will become more collectible.

E: You'll start a trend.

M: And in the process, I'm going to drive up the market value if it kills me.

E: Well, you're becoming a leading expert in the Smurfs. I'm sure at this point you're becoming like one of the country's most leading Smurfs—

M: Which is not a label or a title I want at all, because I feel like that means that I have to know all about the Smurfs' history. And then I have to know about, you know, I mean, I know a general sense of history, but I don't have an encyclopedic knowledge of the Smurfs themselves. I just like collecting them.

E: Did any of your Smurfs make it into the movie? Your real-life Smurfs?

M: Yes. And the trailer teases Michael's, my Smurf obsession a little bit. Exciting.

E: That's very exciting.

L: I'm very jealous. I don't have a cool collection thing. I just collect library cards, which is like very basic.

E: That's cool!

L: I guess. It's very librarian on main of me.

M: If you're not obsessively collecting something, I think that means that you're probably not broken emotionally. I think, I think like obsessive collectors, I could, I mean, I'm speaking for myself. It's like, I think there's a, it's a filling a void, a sadness or a longing or something. So I think it just means that you have your shit together.

E: Yeah. There's something about collecting a bunch of cute little things from my desk that really like feels that, that place in me.

M: I know. I mean, we, and so many of us have that place, you know, and are broken in some sense, or have demons from our past or our childhood. And I think that's the thing that sort of, we all have in common, collectors. I mean, I'm sure there are probably a lot of collectors out there who don't have any problems and are perfectly centered and that. But anyway, speaking for myself, it definitely has been a source of healing for me.

E: Yeah. One more important question. Aside from the movie, is there anything else that you would like to plug? Are you working on anything right now? Shout out.

M: I mean, I just plug TV line.com. You know, if you love television, then you need to be reading TVLine.com. I launched it almost twelve years ago now, and it's an incredible site. Incredibly proud of it. You know, as a TV fanatic myself, it's the website that I would be reading and devouring whether I ran it or not. Yeah and then, you know, the book and the movie! Those are the two big things in my life, the movie especially right now because, you know, it's right around the corner. So I encourage everyone to see it. And, I just wanted to say thank you to both of you for having me on, and for showing interest in the book, and for all the nice things that you've said about it on this podcast.

E: Yeah, thanks for talking with us.

L I'm gonna make that sound-bite my ringtone. Yeah thank you for coming on. Thank you so much, I was so excited. I just kind of DM'd you on a whim.

M: I was so happy to get your DM, I have to say, it was, you know—I have such affection for Millersburg still. That's a gift that Kit gave me, you know, is introducing me to this beautiful town, this beautiful, imperfect, flawed, wonderful town. That holds such a dear place in my heart, and always will. And any time I hear about Millersburg, any time someone from Millersburg reaches out to me, it's just always a very warm and fuzzy feeling.

E: Well if you're every in the area, just let us know!

L: stop by! I'll get you a library card.

M: Oh awesome! I'm going to hold you to that.

L: You bet, I'll do it. I'll get you a blue one. We've got Smurfs-blue library cards.

M: Oh, wow, I love it.

L: Yes, I know. Just for you. Well it looks like that about wraps up our discussion of *Spoiler Alert: The Hero Dies* by Michael Ausiello. Join us next episode as we cover *Detransition, Baby* by Torrey Peters.

This has been Reading the Rainbow, a Dauphin County Library System podcast for books by and about the LGBTQ+ community. If you enjoyed this podcast, please follow us for new book discussions. And if we've piqued your interest in this episode's selection, consider borrowing it from your local library. Thanks for listening!