

## *Detransition, Baby* 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: Hi, my name is Em and I use they/them pronouns.

Lisa: And my name is Lisa and my pronouns are she and her. This week we're discussing *Detransition, Baby* by Torrey Peters. Torrey Peters is the author of the novel *Detransition, Baby*, published by One World, which won the 2021 Penn Hemingway Award for debut fiction. It was also a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Awards, a finalist for the Brooklyn Public Library Award, and was long-listed for the Women's Prize for Fiction. A collection of four novellas titled *Infect Your Friends and Loved Ones* will be published by Random House in 2023. Some content warnings for *Detransition, Baby*: transphobia and homophobia; outing someone at work; domestic violence; miscarriage, which is off-screen and discussed; suicide, off-screen and discussed; and deciding whether to abort a pregnancy.

E: (synopsis) Reese almost had it all. A loving relationship with Amy, an apartment in New York City, and a job that she didn't hate. She had scraped together what previous generations of trans women could only dream of, a life of mundane bourgeois comforts. The only thing missing was a child. Then her girlfriend Amy detransitioned and became Ames, and everything fell apart. Now Reese is caught in a self-destructive pattern, avoiding her loneliness by sleeping with married men. Ames isn't happy either. He thought that detransitioning to live as a man would make life easier, but that decision cost him his relationship with Reese, and losing her meant losing his only family. Even though their romance is over, he longs to find a way back to her. When Ames' boss and lover, Katrina, reveals that she's pregnant with his baby and that she's not sure whether she wants to keep it, Ames wonders if this is the chance he's been waiting for. Could the three of them form some kind of unconventional family and raise the baby together? This provocative debut is about what happens at the emotional, messy, vulnerable corners of womanhood that platitudes and good intentions can't reach. Torrey Peters brilliantly and fearlessly navigates the most dangerous taboos about gender, sex, and relationships, gifting us a thrillingly original, witty, and deeply moving novel.

E: This book, I, man, I read this quite a bit ago. This book has stayed in my mind since I read it. I mean, I've read books that made me feel very sad, but this book made me feel just really sad in ways that I, you know, didn't expect.

L: Yeah, it's a complex book. And it's interesting when I was looking at the book before I had read it, it sounded fairly lighthearted. I thought, you know, oh, it's the unconventional family, maybe a little complex, but, you know, heartwarming. And it's not *not* those things, but it's just so much more.

E: The idea of detransitioning, what a difficult thing for someone to decide to do. And that's a big point of discussion in this book. Ames and his, the way that he goes about the world, and whether or not he is even *he*, right? Reese consistently refers to Ames as Amy throughout the book. And Ames at one point just talks about how it was too hard to be Amy. And that really hurts too, right? You see, you want the best for these characters, and you see how things could be good. But then you also see how the world makes them bad, I guess, you know, you see how these more conventional understandings of being, and some of the more aggressive forms of thinking that find their way into the situation that Ames and

Katrina and Reese have found themselves in. It felt very realistic to me in that sense, you know, being a queer person and seeing, like, how good the world could be and having this community idea and then having very aggressively heteronormative people come in and sort of really mess that up, which isn't to take away sort of the, I think, responsibility that Reese has for some of her decisions. But...

L: You know, we have Reese, and Reese has been a trans woman longer, I think maybe much longer than Amy when they meet. And so you have this, these two very different experiences. And then of course, the experience of Ames later after detransitioning and the experience of Katrina [inaudible] this woman. And when they're thrown together in this, you know, very unconventional relationship. And there's just so much that happens. Reese wants nothing more than to be completely feminine, a very retro idea of feminine and taken care of and a mother. And when Katrina comes on the scene, Reese is so deeply threatened. And I think that's something that Ames or even Amy didn't really understand or didn't really experience in the same kind of way.

E: Yeah. It's as a non-binary person, right, and like, as someone who has really thought very hard about my understanding of my own gender, this book really like hurt me in a lot of ways, being the pain that, and I think Torrey Peters does a really good job writing that, wanting so desperately to fit into some ideal of gender that is perhaps counterintuitive to progress sometimes. And there's a really good interview at the back of the copy that we have with Torrey Peters, where she talks about butch lesbian turfs not wanting trans women in spaces. And this idea that, you know, trans women who want to adhere to femininity, like hyper femininity as traditionally seen in the West is counterintuitive to feminist progress in the eyes of a lot of people who have fought really hard to get away from being obligated to adhere to those standards, which are incredibly constricting if that's not the person that you want to be. On the flip side, you have Ames who tries very hard to adhere to these standards and finds that it's too difficult because she, well, Amy doesn't like pass as well as Reese does, and so for Amy, the pain of perhaps living as an authentic version of themselves is less hurtful than the pain of trying to be a woman and not being accepted as one. And I think that that is such a fundamental conversation that the queer community needs to have. And I think it's getting a lot better. Obviously, I'm pretty young. I'm pretty new on the scene. And this is not something that I have a whole lot of background in, but I think that this is a really, really excellent book to get people to start thinking about gender and what we— how we treat people based on, you know, what they look like and the things that we are afforded and the ways that we're allowed to exist based on how we're perceived. Like I said, this book, it hurt, but I think it was really important for me to read, I guess. I think it's probably important for a lot of people to read, as many books are.

L: It was brutal in places.

E: Oh yeah.

L: There's this whole part where we're introduced to a detransitioned person who was a trans woman. And the, the reaction of the trans woman to this person is one of disgust and suspicion. They kind of see this person as a vampire who just wants to hang around them and be close to them, but isn't really like them. It's very hard to read when you're thinking about the decision that Ames/Amy made to detransition and everything that she had to give up to say, you know, "well, living as a man is just easier." Wow. Like easier than giving up your entire support network and your girlfriend. That's, that's saying a hell of a lot.

E: Yeah. It's, it's brutal, like you said, but it's good. When I told people I was reading this, they were like, "Oh my God, you're going to love it. This is one of the best books I've ever read." And I remember when it came out, I had a lot of friends reading it saying sort of the same thing. And I kind of put it in the back of my mind. Yeah. Don't let our talk about it being hard dissuade you, because it's, it's critically important in terms of looking at how other people go about in the world, I guess. The dedication to this

book is kind of interesting. The dedication is: “To divorced cis women who, like me, had to face starting their own life over without ever reinvesting in the illusions from the past or growing bitter about the future.” And it's an interesting dedication because one of the main characters in this book is Katrina, who is a cis woman who is divorced. And she finds herself unexpectedly pregnant. Ames, because of having been living as a woman for several years, was told that medically he would probably not be able to have children. He didn't think it was possible. He thought he was sterile. And so Katrina now has this opportunity to imagine a new life and she still carries quite a bit of baggage from that prior relationship as does Ames from his prior relationship, quite obviously because he doesn't think that he's going to be able to feasibly be a parent without the support of his ex Reese, which is— that was one of the most, I think Katrina was extremely chill about that request. Obviously she was less than chill at certain points, to say the least. It's an interesting dynamic between Reese and Katrina and our first question, which we pulled directly from the back of the book. If you do read this book and you want to talk about it with other people, I would highly recommend just pulling the questions that they have right in there because it was really hard trying to come up with questions for this book to discuss, without, you know, having some sort of like emotional crisis of conscience, but— “*Detransition, Baby* explores motherhood through several lenses. How do Reese, Katrina and Ames’ feelings on motherhood differ and how do they converge?” And I think that that's a pretty central question to this entire book.

L: Ames’ is feelings on, I'll say “parenthood” right now, were very difficult for me to wrap my head around. He says something along the lines that “I can't be a father and I can't be a parent in a, an apparently heteronormative relationship because everyone will assume I'm a father and I'm not.” And that's a big part of why Ames wants to bring Reese into the parental relationship. And that, you know, that was a, something I really had to think about.

E: Yeah. This idea that to be the best parent that Ames could be, he needed someone intimately close who knew him very authentically. And I want to say something too, quick, about that pronouns, because we are using, you know, different pronouns for Ames and Amy as we're talking about this. And that's something that is kind of a point of contention in the book too, this idea that Ames’ gender... You know, I think Ames also has a lot of trouble with that, obviously, as you know, trying to figure out like, “How do I parent this child when I'm living as a man who has detransitioned from a woman?” Yeah. It's, it's a hard, it makes sense to me, but again, you know, I could not imagine being Katrina and getting that pitch, you know, and trying to fathom like wanting to raise a child with someone, but knowing that perhaps you don't know them as they really are, or as they most authentically want to be, so much so that they need outside support.

L: I think the part that finally helped me understand it was the idea of needing to be an authentic self with a child. You know, you want to be a good parent and that means, you know, giving your child the best of yourself. And that's how I started to understand the reason that Ames couldn't parent as a father.

E: That kind of moves a little bit into: “How does Ames’ relationship with Katrina differ from her relationship with Reese and how are those dynamics different and how are they similar?” And I think that it feels like with Katrina Ames definitely takes more of a masculine role, but with Reese, we see Ames perhaps being more authentically, like, quote-unquote *feminine*, just in the sense that it is very emotionally vulnerable. Ames doesn't really put up any fronts in terms of trying to pose as this father figure. With Katrina, Ames is more of a provider. But then again, he does come to Reese's rescue sort of, but Reese has a habit of getting involved with men who are extremely violent and scary. So I don't know if that's necessarily Ames being a protector so much as it is Ames doing what is absolutely necessary to keep Katrina from being straight-up murdered. Another part of it too is that Reese very clearly does not see Ames as a man. Reese still sees Ames as Amy and there's a lot of, I think, bitterness there because they were very ready to start a life and seemingly the perfect life. And then Ames decided that it was too hard to maintain. And I think that for anyone that would be, you know, soul crushing. And so I think

Reese certainly holds a lot of animosity towards Katrina, maybe not animosity, but there's a longing for something that Katrina is able to do that Reese is not, right? And so, Ames is very cognizant of that as well, in terms of the way that Ames goes about interacting with Katrina and Reese. And he's very sensitive to the fact that Reese very much wants to be a mother and Katrina doesn't know if she does, because something we also haven't discussed, I don't think yet, is Katrina has had a miscarriage and it was a very difficult miscarriage. And so, for Katrina, she has this incredible fear about pregnancy and this incredible apprehension about carrying this pregnancy to term. Whereas Reese is unbelievably envious of the fact that Katrina even has that possibility, right? And again, Ames is very sensitive to that. You know, I wouldn't describe this relationship as like a throuple either, because Katrina and Reese are not involved at all. It's Ames and Katrina, and then Ames and Reese aren't really involved romantically at all at this point either. They obviously have quite a long history, but they're not co-parenting. And so Ames' conversations with Reese kind of tend to be more to the point, whereas the conversations with Katrina are maybe more couched in sort of a, an idyllic fantasy.

L: I hadn't really noticed that, although I think you're right. What I was thinking about when you said that Ames behaves in a more masculine way with Katrina, I'm thinking about the difference between the way Amy is with Reese in the flashbacks and the way Ames is with Reese in current day. And Ames is more masculine when he's pursuing Reese and trying to convince her of this whole idea of parenting with the three of them. It reminds me very much of a man who's determined to have his way and is going to have himself heard and completely different from when Amy was with Reese and had a lot of things that she wanted to say and needed to say and didn't. And that was part of her decision to detransition.

E: This book also really made me think about the way that I sort of perceive other trans people. And that was really hard for me to grapple with. And that's something that I've been working on personally for a while. And I think that all of us, to some extent, need to work on because we have these internalized ideas of gender and what somebody should look like if they're a man or a woman. What was your perspective on the speculative family that Reese, Katrina and Ames sought to create together? Did this make you think differently about the meaning of family?

L: I don't know that it made me think differently about the meaning of family. I know many different kinds of families, including those with multiple parents in different configurations and relationships. But I guess what was unusual in this particular scenario was that, you know, Katrina, she begins this relationship with Ames, she does not know that Ames was a trans woman, she finds herself pregnant. Then she finds out. She has her freak out moment, which I do think is justified not having known this thing about her lover that is now potentially going to be in her life for the life of this child. And then she kind of comes around and she comes around because of her mom, who— I forget exactly what her mom says, but it's just sort of like, you know, “Hey, this could work out. It could be all right.” And I thought it was an interesting way to kind of bring the broader idea of family in. It isn't just these three folks, but that, you know, Reese and Ames don't have relationships with their parents so much. So then through Katrina, the child will have grandparents, you know, aunts and uncles and cousins and so on. And I thought that was, they didn't really discuss that potential benefit, but I, I guess that's what I thought of when I thought of family.

E: Yeah. I had not even considered that aspect of it just because of the nature of like queer friends and family and the idea of, sort of, found family and, you know, Reese and Ames talk about that, being each other's found family. And so I guess I had never really thought about like extended family and I grew up not having cousins until I was like 15 and that always bummed me out because I knew people who had really close relationships with their cousins and yeah, without Katrina in the picture, I guess this child wouldn't have that kind of family, which doesn't necessarily mean that it's any less if they didn't have that. Right. But it's just, it's something that that's a whole aspect that I didn't even consider. I had already kind of been thinking about the nature of family and the idea of, like, monogamy versus polyamory. And I

wouldn't say that this is even polyamory so much as it is, like, co-parenting, again, but just the idea that maybe two people on their own aren't equipped to raise a child. Maybe it does take more than just those two people. And that doesn't mean that those two people are wrong and that doesn't mean that that child is going to be any less cared for or lack in any way or even necessarily be exposed to. Because I feel like when it comes to this idea of the monogamous heteronormative family, people get really mad. They get really angry. I think that because it, it calls into question their own understanding of themselves and what they're supposed to be. And if other people can form a family that looks so different and is so happy, I don't know. It really, this kind of family shouldn't, in my mind, be so out of the ordinary. And I think too, for a lot of queer people, the idea of family is— we push those boundaries a little bit more than perhaps the general population. Which isn't to say that cis or straight people can't have incredibly intimate friendships and have found families and that sort of way. But just the idea that parenting can be more than two people and could be better for that kid, you know? I think that we would do a lot better as a people if we allowed ourselves to admit that, that we might not be equipped on our own or even with our partner to care for our kid, you know? I think there are a lot of kids that are probably suffering because of that. That also is what makes this book so hard. They do imagine this future that looks pretty grand and you really, you really want that for them.

L: Parenthood is, from what I understand, terrifying. And it, you know, if I tried to imagine being faced with raising a child, I think it's terrifying. And I know that, you know, young people facing that without any kind of support network, like those who have moved far away from family and friends. I mean, they just face these huge challenges. So it makes absolute sense in my mind to the idea of found family and pulling your support network around you. And why not extend that to your child and to child rearing?

E: And, I don't know, the idea too that we could formerly be in a relationship with someone in one way and still recognize that they can have incredible value in our personal future and the future of the people that we care about, while also recognizing that the relationship before was maybe not necessarily the most feasible way for that to happen. And I think that's a really important conversation too. Obviously Reese and Ames, their relationship is not perfect by any stretch, and there's a lot of, you know, unresolved issues there, but they care very much about one another. I think Ames is a lot more willing to reenter this sort of relationship with Reese than perhaps Reese is with Ames. They're still willing to recognize that even though it didn't work in the past, they can still benefit incredibly from having one another in their lives and that they could create some sort of family together. I don't know. I just, I think that's, that's really important too, because we have this understanding that—well, at least, I don't know, maybe not. This could just be nature of me like being young and the people that I'm around, not necessarily having the emotional maturity to recognize that you can still be friends with your exes if you break it off in an amenable way. But I think that's really important, you know? I think young people need to talk about that more too, and— There's a lot in this book! But it really just makes you think about many aspects of being, why they are the way they are and how they could be different.

L: It really opened up new perspectives and definitely made me think. I just wanted to throw in there, like, I don't know, maybe this is, I just wanted Amy and Reese to get back together.

E: Yeah.

L: It just, yeah. Their whole relationship was just very tender and loving and understanding even with everything. Each of them had to deal with separately. Well, if Katrina felt threatened, I can certainly understand that with that kind of intimacy between exes.

E: There's a lot of mutual respect there, you know, and I think this is a really good model for like how to talk to people about how they're feeling about things and how to, you know, navigate complex emotions about relationships and jealousy. And obviously not all of these things are applicable because a lot of the

issues in this book have to deal specifically with like womanhood and pregnancy and those kinds of tension points. The characters in this novel do a really good job of sitting with their thoughts and then talking to each other about them and trying to come up with amenable solutions for the future.

L: And while still also having like very realistic moments of stress and overreaction and confusion.

E: Absolutely. Just in general, I think this was a really realistic novel in terms of like human emotion and really all the credit goes to Torrey Peters because I can't imagine the emotional work that she had to do to write this book.

L: I couldn't have written this book without crying a lot.

E: Absolutely. Absolutely. I think it's her debut novel too, which is, I cannot wait to see what comes from Torrey Peters in the next few years. I'm really excited for those novellas. I'm a sucker for a novella or a short story, mostly because I often don't have the attention span to stick with an entire novel at one time, but I'm really looking forward to what else she writes. I hope it's just as, you know, emotionally introspective. I can't wait to cry more to what Torrey Peters has to write. That wraps up our discussion about *Detransition, Baby* written by Torrey Peters. Join us next episode as we cover *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* by Melinda Lo.

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