

Last Night at the Telegraph Club 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.



Annika: I am Annika. Pronouns are any that you wish to use for me. I'm fine with them all.

Bailey: Alright. I'm Bailey. Pronouns: she/they.

A: Melinda Lowe is a— Melinda Lo is an American writer of young adult novels, including *Ash Huntress*, *Adaptation*, *Inheritance*, *Align in the Dark*, and this week's book, *Last Night at the Telegraph Club*. She also does research on diversity in young adult literature and publishing. So, this week's book is *Last Night at the Telegraph Club*. It is about 17-year-old Lily Hu. It is set in America in 1954, which is not a safe place for two young girls to fall in love, especially not in Chinatown. Red scare paranoia threatens everyone, including Chinese Americans like Lily, with deportation looming over her father, despite his hard-won citizenship. Lily and Kath risk everything to let their love see the light of day.

B: So we start, like you said, it's in 1954 in San Francisco in Chinatown. And Lily Hu is the main character, is mostly discovering her sexual identity and what it means to be, as her parents call, a good Chinese American. But also there's the love interest of Lily, named Kath, and it goes on during the red scare paranoia, especially for her family, who's being discriminated against because of their Chinese heritage. I really enjoyed it because it felt different. I feel like a lot of modern queer novels are almost like so contemporary that it feels a little bit silly sometimes. I don't know if that's a good way to put it, but I liked just that it was almost like a period novel and it still had all the themes that I look for in those modern queer novels. I also really liked that it wasn't tragic. It didn't have this awful tragedy traumatizing type of situation that I feel like a lot of queer novels have, especially in that time period.

A: I spent a lot of the book being extremely worried that something terrible was going to happen. I think that colored how I viewed it as I was reading it, but I was very glad, like you, that it was not tragic.

B: Yeah, I agree. It's nice to have a hopeful ending to something like this. Actually, I wanted your thoughts— When Kathleen or Kath was first introduced, I was like, oh, okay, this is it. This is the love interest. It was one of those things where you could just tell. I don't know if it was the way it was written or if I was expecting it, but I really liked that I was like, “okay, I know how to read this character and read about her best friend, Shirley.” A lot of, I think, other people would think like, oh, it's another female character. Maybe this is the love interest, but off the bat, you're like, “oh, this is a domineering best friend.” I feel like we've all had that person in our lives who we love and have this whole history with, but then it's a weird time, too, for her in high school that she has this contentious relationship with her best friend over just these things that they can't even talk about. It's clearly from her relationship with Kath and the way that Shirley is changing and everything that all these undertones are influencing how they're treating each other, but I think Melinda Lo did a good job with capturing that teenage essence of, we're not going to talk about what's the issue here, we're just going to not be friends for a while. I thought that was really good, that relationship.

A: I feel like we all have had that one friend that we've been friends with forever, but then something comes up and you're like, “I really can't relate to this person anymore,” so that added a humanity to it as well. Not that I didn't need it anymore. I mean, this is one of the most, I felt immediately connected to all

of the characters, and I say “all” as though there's a bunch, but I mean, every character that was introduced, even for a short bit, I felt like I knew who they were, and that's a mark of great writing.

I mean, even the minor characters like Tommy and Lena?

B: Yeah. Yeah, Lena. *Lana*.

A: *Lana*, thank you. Oh my goodness. They felt very human to me too, and the conversations that were had, even between side characters, you felt like, “oh yes, this is something that I can relate to,” and it's just, like I said, amazing writing.

B: I said with *Lana*, and I'm not going to spoil anything, but the way that her character develops at the end, toward the end of the book, you're right, it totally makes her just so much more human. It's something we all would do, I think, in that situation, and even just with Tommy, he starts out as this character, I thought it was interesting too, the pronouns are tough in the book, with the drag king, because they didn't have the pronoun things, like the discussion back then, so they keep referring to Tommy as she, but I kept thinking he, and so I guess I'm going to go with he for this, but in the beginning, Lily idolizes him as this, obviously I would too, if I were in that situation, and didn't have any exposure to masculinity in a feminine way, I guess. I loved the kind of obsession that Lily had with Tommy as a character, and then I loved that she met him too, because that was just so cool, and you're right, it totally just humanized him, the drinking seemed to have a drinking issue, and just a lot of the things that went into these characters were not like, “oh, it's a masked lesbian character in the 50s,” it was queer characters are very intense, and yeah, complicated, I liked that that was represented.

A: I found it very funny that one of the people that Lily says kind of made her question, was Katharine Hepburn in a suit, and while I'm not old enough to watch those movies, when they first came out, I was a huge, huge classic movie buff when I was a kid, and oh my goodness, same.

B: With Katharine Hepburn, yeah, all I think of is Cate Blanchett playing Katharine Hepburn, and I was like, “my goodness,” but that's true, it's like when you're early on figuring out your sexuality, and you're not quite yet at the point of being like, “well, I'm attracted to someone of the same sex as me,” and it starts out as this sort of like, “oh, I like women in suits”, or “I like women with short hair, that's interesting,” or “I like wearing my hats backwards,” it's just that slow easing into sort of queerness, I guess, and becoming open with yourself about it, and so I thought that she did a really good job in this book too, Lily finds that pulp book, lesbian novel in the drugstore, and is just kind of entranced by it, that was the kind of thing that would grab me as a young person, kind of like, “why am I so into this? Why does this grab my attention?” And I liked that level of questioning that she had.

A: Yeah, it is funny how relatable everything is for how it's taking place in the 50s, but yet, I feel like a lot of the stuff that she goes through, I'm like, “girl, same.” I remember going down into the basement of the bookstore and finding queer section, and it's like five pulp books, and you're like, oh, my goodness. It's funny, because in an interview with Melinda Lowe, she did say Lily's experiences are very similar to hers, even though she was growing up in the 80s instead of the 50s.

B: Yeah, I thought that was really cool. Oh, I had a quote written down from her about it not being tragic, the ending. She said, “I'm not sure if I'm capable of writing a book about queer characters that's hopeless and overly traumatic. I just wanted to make sure there was a sense of hope at the end, and that was important to me.” And that's her quote, which I love, because the hope is totally what queer readers need. Like, we need to hold on to that.

A: Yeah, it's true. And yeah, like I said, I was so worried it was going to be something, especially being from the 50s, them being interracial. So I was like, everything is stacked against them. But even with all that, it did end up with a nice feeling of hope. And there was really nothing during even that was frightening. Even though I'm like, okay, these girls are walking around 1954 in the middle of the night, and nobody harasses them?

B: Right. I know. They just got catcalled a few times, and that was it.

A: I know, right? I'm like, really? All right.

B: I thought it was interesting that Lily was so into space and rocket ships, and that Kath was so into planes. I feel like that was kind of an obvious connection to make between the two of them, but it was so cool that it was something that wasn't super feminine. It was something that kind of made them both stand out, and it brought them together. I liked that a lot, too.

A: The fact that they met in math class was also very non-traditional femme kind of thing. Kind of fun, too. And, yeah, you kind of end up being like, "hmm, maybe they do come together later in life and work together."

B: Yeah, it's fun to try and think about, oh, okay. Well, I think what I liked about the ending, along with the hope, was that it didn't leave us disappointed. It was so open-ended. There was no way of cutting off any hopeful future for them. You can still make it up in your mind, like, okay, this is how it could have gone. And I love that. It reminds me of books—I guess it is a YA novel—but it reminds me of reading when I was a kid. The everything is going to end and be okay kind of feeling was really refreshing.

A: And, I mean, that is kind of a staple of a romance novel, is the happily ever after, or at least the happy for now. I also did like that the door was not closed.

B: Yes, that's a good way to put it.

A: She could have left it at where certain things end and just been like, and that's the end. But she did not leave that door closed, and I did like that, too.

B: Yeah. Yeah, and even I read an interview with author Melinda Lo, and she said that she spoke to a few lesbians in San Francisco who were growing up in the 50s. And I thought that was really cool. And there was a picture of her with a woman who walked around Chinatown and everything, and I think that's cool, too, because I think of, like, lesbians in the 50s, and I think, "oh, that must have been so sad. They must be really depressed now. Like, they must be dead." I don't know. That's just what I think. And I love seeing that she connected with someone who was, like, had a very positive experience as a lesbian in the 50s. And so, I think that just adds to the hopeful feeling of, like, it can't end and be okay. Like, it'll still go on and be fine.

A: Absolutely. Yeah. And, like, the ridiculous amount of research she did is amazing. Like, a lot of authors would just be like, "this is how I feel like it would happen."

B: Right.

A: Just the amount of stuff that she's like, I know this happened, and this kind of thing was a thing, and this is a possibility, and even Aunt Julie, Julia. I am terrible with names. I wish I could remember her name. Her aunt. Her aunt was based on an actual person, too. So it's like, that is really awesome that all of this is stuff that really could have happened.

B: Especially with how relevant, like, the space stuff and the space program and everything was at the time. And with the immigrants joining and being computers and everything in this, like, it was just a whole jumble of factors, I guess. Like, a jumble of complications that were in the story that it still went smoothly. Like, it still, there were hitches, but it still carried on, like, in a believable way with all of the obstacles. And I think that's awesome, too. Like, it's a sign of a good writer.

A: Yes. The intermingling of all the various things, like, the Red Scare and her dad losing his papers and things like that.

B: Yeah. Even the more simple stuff, like, with Shirley getting a boyfriend and her feeling, like, a little bit, not left out, but kind of like, "oh, that's my best friend. How did I not know that about her?" But she still has that about herself that her best friend doesn't know. And that's just another complication that, like, you can relate to and kind of see. And it carries the story along, which I thought was cool. And then I also saw before reading this, actually that she was inspired by *Price of Salt* and *Tipping the Velvet*. Have you read either of those?

A: I haven't, but I have heard of both of them. In fact, I think *Tipping the Velvet* is downstairs in the library right now.

B: Yeah. And then *Price of Salt* is, like, my favorite book of all time. I think, like, that is the book I always go back and read. And so I was so excited to read. I love it because I can see where she was inspired by that because it's both 50s, 60s kind of lesbian romance. And she makes it, like, I guess, less jarring than *the Price of Salt*. *The Price of Salt* has a lot of disappointments. And this captured the tone of that kind of mid-century queerness, but it carried it really smoothly. And you can see where the inspiration came from, but it wasn't that story. It was still very young and kind of innocent. Like, this was kind of an innocent story of queerness.

A: Absolutely. And you mentioned other books. The funny thing was in the outro for the book, I got the Audible version. I actually listened to it. She mentions that while pulp fiction was popular for lesbians and queer people in general, the ending, because of the way morality laws were, they had to end poorly. So just the fact that she took the feel of that era and gave it a positive ending just feels like, you know, kind of patching a wound, you know?

B: Yeah.

A: Like the children of that era, their fiction had to end poorly. But because it's written now, it's okay to have a happy ending.

B: Right. It's rabbiting the past a little bit.

A: Yeah, exactly.

B: I also listened to it on, I think, either Audible or Libby. But I listened to it and then I read some of it, the physical copy. And I enjoyed the audiobook so much because the spoken Chinese was something that when I see all the characters on a page that I'm reading, and I don't know how to read them, of course, I'm just kind of inferring what it might say and kind of glancing over it. But in the audio, the physical did have footnotes for what it meant, like what the Chinese letters meant. But I really liked in the audiobook that she spoke Chinese and read them the correct way. And that added to it a lot too, just the tone of it and understanding how her parents were talking and all of that type of stuff.

A: Yeah, that is interesting. I didn't go back and look, but I did hear that outro part that she used the actual characters within the book. And I feel like that did add a little bit more because you're looking at it— and it feels true to the character to have it written in the Chinese and in the audio book pronounced.

B: Yeah, pronounced properly was cool because there's Cantonese and there's Mandarin, like there's so many different dialects. And what she said too about putting the actual Chinese characters in the book was that the Romanized versions of the characters weren't really even around back in the fifties. So it was almost a more like accurate representation of it anyway.

A: Yet again, the amount of research, like the fact that she used like words like Oriental and Negro that are not necessarily good now, in fact are generally not great. It just, it helped you like infuse yourself a little bit more into the time period because I feel like a lot of historicals can feel anachronistic if you don't use the terminology of the day. And her being of the group does help the use of that as well. It's like, yeah, it doesn't feel quite as offensive as if like somebody else did it.

B: Yeah. Totally. Yeah. She's able to make it like educational almost like it's, it's not something that's going to upset people. It's more, it's going to add to the story and add to your knowledge on what was going on. So yeah, you're right. That was, I liked that she did that. This was the first time a book with a queer female lead won the national book award that she won, which is so cool. And I feel like that is as much as we're getting into like queer literature becoming more mainstream, there's still that factor of the female queer lead. I feel like there's so many steps to go through to get to true representation.

A: Absolutely. Especially when you factor in the author is also queer and not white.

B: Yeah. And even, I guess this goes back to what you were saying earlier about the, the words she is like Oriental and everything that we wouldn't use today, but even characters were asking her, do you speak English or they, they wouldn't ask her. That's what I like. They'd ask the person she was with. "Does she speak English?" And that, I think that subtle difference of like asking the person she's with, like totally taking the control away from Lily was so well-written because it just makes the tone of the whole scene. Like you can picture they're not looking at Lily when they're even talking to her.

A: Nope. Yeah. And I know from some of my Asian American friends, this is still a struggle today. And it's just like, it's good to see it in novels so that if you are somebody who casually just kind of does that, you're like, Oh man, maybe, maybe I shouldn't.

B: Maybe that question is a bit dated.

A: Yeah.

B: Yeah. Yeah, but I mean, it was interesting like the pulp fiction that she reads that, and like you were saying that there were so many rules with how they could end and morality laws and everything. It's interesting to see with this book, how that is still an issue. Like in one of the interviews with Melinda Lo, she was saying that some of her books are on banned books lists, like in other States. Of course, we all hear about banned books, especially working at the library, but reading from an author being like "my books are banned." Like that's so crazy. Like it just, it adds, I guess the theme of part of the themes of this book itself, which that we're limiting representation for queerness. And then we're just doing it even more with these books that are teaching us about it. So I liked it. She points that out. And she also talks about how, what she is most worried about isn't necessarily the official banning of books, but it's librarians and people who are stocking these shelves who are afraid to order a book that might be questionable. And this would fall into a lot of those categories of maybe not being fully banned, but people just kind of shying away because they don't want to start an issue. I thought that was interesting that she brought that

up. And I never really think about the perspective of the author in books being banned. And I never think of them being so modern. I think much older books.

A: Exactly. You always think, “Oh, well, you know, it's like *the House at Pooh Corner*,” but no, it's modern stuff too.

B: Yeah.

A: As a writer getting my, my book band is hashtag-goals. So it's like, “Hey, if you're going to hate it enough that you're going to talk about it on the internet, that's publicity for me.”

B: Yeah. Well, And I feel like that's kind of the energy of the queer community is like, if you're going to make a problem with this, we're going to make it a bigger problem for you. Like we will come back double-time from what they're doing. Yeah, I like that. That's the tone of obviously the readers today is in this book, especially I think is we hear the discrimination toward Lily and we're like, “no, no.” Like our reaction is: Uh-uh, you're not going to do her that way. And reading it and being very discouraged or disheartened by, by the sentiment. It's more. We're strengthened by the—like Melinda Lo, even being a lesbian herself and saying these things and being like, “it's okay to push back a little bit.” And I like that a lot.

A: I really like her as an author. She's actually the author of the first queer book I ever read for funsies which was *Ash*.

B: Oh really? Oh, yeah I just put *Ash* on my want-to-read list. People would ask about why she wrote Kath and Lily as the slow-burn romance and Melinda Lo kept saying, she's like, “I didn't,” she was like “I didn't mean to write it as a slow-burn romance, this is just naturally how it goes for young queer people.” Like, she, half the book is her discovering that she's queer at all, and so I like that she points out that it wasn't about it being a slow-building romance, it was about them figuring it out. Just the first step of figuring out that it's a romance is such a big part of it.

A: That's so true too because I, yet again, feel like that's so relatable because, as she said in the interviews, once Lily figures out what's going on, then it turns into romance. As the reader you're like, “oh yes this is going to be a romance.” You kind of forget about those awkward, in-between moments where it's like, “Did they like me?”

B: Yeah exactly and that's like how it was for me, was, “Oh she's being nice to me, like does she want to be my friend? Is she flirting?” And that's so hard when you're like young and queer and you just have no idea how to tell who around you is queer and—

A: That's exactly it.

B: Yeah she does a good job with that. And it's almost the kind of thing like, that I remember being a kid and having like a relationship like that in high school like her and Kath and thinking like “Oh I have a friend-crush on her,” like that's what I would tell myself, “I want to be her friend so badly.” And in reality, like—

A: “I want to be friends so hard!”

B: Yeah, yeah exactly! I think it was— You're right it's totally relatable the way that Lily is, with just finding herself.

A: And just the whole thing surrounding it. It's like “oh her friend's queer, am I queer? Is she queer? I don't know.”

B: Right. Yeah. Yeah, like you're looking for every single sign that you can possibly grasp for, and ignoring all the obvious, like, the things telling you like “yes of course she's, she's showing interest in you.” It's like, as the reader in this book we're more knowledgeable than her. It's like we're watching from above, kind of being, like, “I know what you're feeling, Lily, like, I can help you with this. Just let me help you.”

A: Exactly it's like “Kiss her!”

B: Yeah, yeah, yeah, but it's, it's one of those things that it's such a relief that when they do realize it, and they have—again, not going to spoil a lot, but—when they have like these scenes, like the scene under the stairs in the club is so, just, like you can feel that relief of being like “We've told each other that we like each other,” like “we've told each other,” it is relief like it's so— it's so sweet it's just so sweet.

A: It really is. I felt like it had the potential of being like, sort of a slice-of-life where it was kind of like “doe-dee-doe,” kind of bland to walk through, but just all the relatable items and all of the feelings she goes through... it's, yeah it's not boring at all.

B: No not boring. Yeah! Yeah, it's a fun story and I like all the elements and I— Aunt Judy, that was her name. I liked her role in it as well, because she kind of was like keeping it more real for Lily. Like she was, “You have a whole future ahead of you, it's not just this girl and this devastation right now, like, it's everything to come.” And I think we see Lily at the end of the book kind of learn that, that it's not all that bad. And I think her parents were very intense. Aunt Judy was kind of a light for Lily like telling her, like, “Things are okay. Things aren't as bad.”

A: I honestly hoped that Aunt Judy would be like, “And I'm bisexual!” It wasn't really a term that they would have used back then, but yeah I almost wondered.

B: I'm gonna infer that on my own, that Judy was bisexual.

A: One thing that did intrigue me was the inclusion of Aunt Judy and the parents' little scenes from their own past. And I find it very interesting because in most YA novels, you don't get the perspective from the parents and you don't really get the in-depth of why they feel this way and the troubles that they go through as well, and I thought that was a very interesting inclusion. Especially since, with the amount of research and the amount of time-period realism that she was inserting into the book, it did end up being helpful to— seeing how the characters were and how things were even before Lily's time.

B: Yeah totally. I know. I agree. And you're right, the research makes a big difference. It makes it just more believable. Like, it makes me not want to take everything with a grain of salt, because I believe that she actually looked into it.

A: Right, yeah, and it also helps you feel like the parents probably truly aren't bad people, and it gives you sort of a little bit of their perspective as well.

B: Yeah because if we just learned what they were doing without their motivations, it would feel, kind of like bad parents, but when you know their motivations and why they're doing things, like, it all kind of makes sense.

A: Absolutely. Especially things they themselves went through and it's like, “Yeah, I get it, you want your kid to not have to struggle.”

B: Yeah, yeah, it's all just so— There's a lot of relatable themes and it's relatable for the right people, like for queer people. Like, it doesn't— it can be relatable for other people but we don't need it to be. Like, she did this for us, I feel like.

A: And the fun thing, too, is—I mean, based on the fact that it won an award and all that—it clearly is relatable for other people too, so— and that's what we want.

B: Yes!

A: Relate to us!

That wraps up our discussion of *Last Night at the Telegraph Club* by Melinda Lo, and this is the last episode of Season Three, so hopefully you will join us for season four in Spring!

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