

A Psalm for the Wild-Built 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.



Ashley: Hi, my name is Ashley and my pronouns are she/they.

Em: Hi, my name is Em and my pronouns are they/them. And today we are talking about *Psalm for the Wild-Built* by Becky Chambers. And just to get us started, here is a little bit of information about Becky Chambers from her website, which is otherscribbles.com. Becky Chambers is the bestselling author of *the Wayfarers* series, *the Monk and the Robot* novellas, and other standalone works of science fiction. She's a two-time Hugo Award winner and has been nominated for the Nebula, the Locus, the Arthur C. Clarke Award, and the Women's Prize for Fiction, among others. Her latest book is *A Prayer for the Crown Shy*, the second installment of *Monk and Robot*. She is currently working on a new standalone novel. Becky has a background in performing arts and grew up in a family heavily involved in space science. She spends her free time playing video and tabletop games, watching bugs and looking through her telescope. Having hopped around the world a bit, she has settled down for the moment in Humboldt County, California, where she lives with her wife. She hopes to see Earth from orbit one day. This is my first Becky Chambers book, and I loved it. But I know Ashley has read a lot of Becky Chambers.

A: I've read all of the Becky Chambers books. Yes, big fan. They're all great.

E: Do you have a favorite?

A: I can't pick one.

E: That's okay!

A: I like them all for different reasons. But I will say that I think the one that I needed the most when I read it was this one. It really resonated with me when I first read *A Song for the Wild-Built*.

E: Yeah, I also really, I don't know, this book sat, I don't want to say heavy with me. In fact, it made me feel a lot lighter when I was done reading it. And made me, I don't know, really appreciate myself, if that makes sense. And we'll talk a little bit more about why, because of the book. But this book is dedicated to "anybody who could use a break," which I thought was nice. Especially because I feel like a lot of us don't prioritize rest as much as we should. And this book explains very well why that's important. Or maybe not so much important as much as it is just kind of integral to life in and of itself. But I know that sounds extremely vague at the moment. But hopefully it'll make a little more sense in a little bit.

A: Yeah, I think the dedication of it sparked my interest. And then after reading it, like, okay, I understand. Especially in a world where the commercialized idea of self-care is just kind of like shoved down your throats all the time. Especially this book was published in summer of 2021, so we were still dealing with COVID and all the complications and lack of socialization in-person with people. And, you know, everyone really needed a break at that time. It was a nice new way to think about prioritizing rest and taking breaks and what that looks like. So on Becky's website that Em mentioned, the book is described as "a novella for seekers of small comforts." The plot is described as: It's been centuries since

the robots of Panga gained self-awareness and laid down their tools. Centuries since they wandered en masse into the wilderness, never to be seen again.

Centuries since they faded into myth and urban legend. One day the life of a tea monk is upended by the arrival of a robot there to honor the old promise of checking in. Robot cannot go back until the question of “what do people need?” is answered. But the answer to that question depends on who you ask and how. They're going to need to ask it a lot. Becky Chambers' new series asks, “In a world where people have what they want, does having more matter?” We always like to include content warnings for the books that we read for this podcast. I couldn't really think of any.

E: I wrote down “contemplations of personhood and meaning,” which is not so much a warning, so much as just a general theme for this book. It's really existential. It's really philosophical. It's not in a way that is dense. So don't hear that and think like, oh, that's not the kind of book that I want to read. It is extremely cozy and I think easy to digest. But a central question for one of our main characters, Sibling Dex, is like, “why do I feel this way? And what is my purpose?” And so, you know, if you're not really in a place that you want to delve into that kind of narrative, that's the only sort of warning I would give maybe. But at the same time, like, I think if you are struggling with those things, maybe this is the perfect book to dive into, right? Just because of the way that they talk about what it is to be a living thing existing in the world and, you know, sort of the responsibilities of a thing living in the world. So that's, you know, again, not exactly a content warning so much as like a content description, I suppose. Just keep that in mind. So, Ashley, I know you've read this book several times at this point. And I went through it twice myself just in preparation because it's not very long. I think we should mention that, too. It's pretty easy to sit and read. I listened to the audio book and it's four hours. So that, you know, gives you I think it's I think like 150 pages, something like that. There's not a lot to read necessarily, but there is a lot to think about. And in talking about our first impressions of the book, I don't know, Ashley, what did you think about the first time you read it? I know that you said it came at a really difficult time. And yeah, what did you feel when you read it the first time?

A: I'm trying to remember the emotions that I was going through as I was reading it. I do remember as soon as I put it down, I told everyone that I knew that they needed to read it. Especially I told a lot of people that I knew who were in their mid to late 20s and in their early to mid 30s. I think it's common for people in that age group, myself included, to have their brain kind of catch up to their reality. You know, you spend your childhood and your early adulthood, for most people, in school. And then you're worried about getting into the workforce. And then you're in it and you start to feel semi-established. And then, I don't know, for me at least, I was just like, “am I doing this right? Is this what it's supposed to be like? Is this what I want to do?” So the issues that the main character, Sibling Dex, goes through are things that I've personally gone through myself. And so having this laid out in a book and seeing it, someone else experience it in such a gentle yet very philosophical way, it helped me to reflect on those very similar questions that I was thinking of myself as I was reflecting internally. I don't know. I just really like it.

E: Yeah, and that's fine. And I totally agree with you. I think that a lot of us feel the way that Sibling Dex feels at the beginning of this novel at one time or another, right? This feeling of existential crisis, despite, on paper, everything seeming like it should be fine, but still internally feeling like you're not really sure of yourself and you don't know why, or you feel like there's something missing despite having maybe a family that loves you, a job that you're really good at and that you're enjoying, and community that appreciates you. If you have all of those things and you still feel this sense of like, “okay, what am I doing?” I think that's a very relatable feeling, especially within the context of the novella coming out during COVID. It had a lot of us thinking like, “okay, everything in society is stripped away.” And I think a lot of people had to question their place in all of that and really had to come to grips with being alone and figuring out what that means for them.

A: Yeah, I think that's a good point. And I think it's important, as we delve into this conversation, to kind of give more background information about the world in this book. It's a world that went through a very industrial age and there was a lot of machinery. And at some point, the robots that they were using for production became sentient and they had to deal with this ethical issue. And also coming to terms with the damage that they have done to their environment on this planet because of their mass production, coming to terms with the fact that it's not sustainable. And so that happened centuries ago.

And now Sibling Decks, as we follow them through this story, everything is taken care of for everyone. No one goes hungry. Everyone has a purpose. Everyone has support from community. So there's not a whole lot of big senses of fear or imminent danger or anything like that. And so to see Sibling Decks go through these existential questions when all their basic needs are met and there's nothing that they can pinpoint that's wrong. I think that was a very smart and important thing for Becky to include because as a human, when you're going through these struggles and thinking like, "what's wrong with me? If only this little thing was different" or "if only I was making more money or if only I had X, Y, Z product, things would be easier or better." And so I think here she's trying to say, "you're still going to feel those things. It's going to be maybe temporary relief."

E: Well, no, I think that's a good point you bring up too, just about the feeling of this book because it is, I guess, a post-apocalypse because life as humankind kind of knew it changed drastically during this period of time called The Awakening, which is when all of the robots, the factory robots just gain sentience and decide they don't want to work in the factories anymore. And that's not really, like, we're not in the high-stakes part of the post-apocalypse in this novel. And I think that's very different than a lot of other novels in that genre in the sense that this isn't a dystopia and there's no real, like you said, threat or fear, but it's entirely an internal monologue that Dex is trying to unravel. And as someone who really does appreciate dystopian settings or alternate future ideas, I sort of lament how difficult those are to get through sometimes because of how high the stakes are and how much violence there can be and how society is just falling apart. It can be very depressing to read. And this, I think, is just in stark contrast because you have the societal structure where not only are your basic needs met, but there are also things in place to help meet your emotional needs, not just your physical needs. And it seems like society, Panga, has really put in the effort to not only take care of each other from just like a human perspective, but also take care of the earth. Right? Which was a really refreshing, I think, novel to read, at least for me in a time where I'm really scared about climate change, I think a lot of people are really scared about climate change. And obviously this book doesn't outline sort of the reversal process of climate change, but it imagines a future where people have come together in a very productive way as opposed to falling apart and sort of clawing at one another for resources. The vibe of this book I appreciated as somebody who likes, you know, sci-fi, but doesn't always like how stressful it can be in a sci-fi novel. Different kind of stress Sibling Dex is dealing with, but no environmental factors that are making life really difficult.

A: Yeah. Because when the book starts, Sibling Dex is living in The City, literally the only city on their continent as a garden monk, taking care of a garden at a monastery. And they get this feeling that they can't shake, that they're no longer satisfied with the work that they are doing. And they blame it on the fact that there are no crickets in the garden. And everything would be better if they had the ability to leave the city and go into more remote villages and hear crickets. And so they decide to switch jobs to be a tea monk, which is essentially, I don't know how you explain it, like a troubadour, but a person who deals with tea. And so they get a ox bike.

E: Yeah. Their wagon, their ox bike. Yeah. I had a hard time sort of trying to visualize that. And also how strong you'd have to be to carry that all over the place.

A: I think it's on the cover.

E: Oh, you're right.

That's something that you miss out on when you listen to the audiobook. You're not opening up the cover of the book every time you sit down to read it.

A: Yeah. It's essentially like a wagon that stores all their wares and their needs, but also has like a lofted area for them to sleep. And this bike attached to the front of it, like you would a horse, I guess, that they pedal. And it sounds in some parts like it can assist with the up hills and stuff. But there's also lots of descriptions of Dex struggling up hills and being very much in need of a shower. But they take this wagon, this bike, from village to village throughout the continent and set up a temporary pop-up tea shop outside for people to come and have a cup of tea, but also a place to vent. How would you describe that?

E: It's sort of like therapy, essentially. I mean, Sibling Dex takes an unconventional route to becoming a tea monk. Usually, monks will apprentice with a currently established tea monk to learn the trade. And Dex, because they decide that this is something that they have to do and they don't want any help and they're going to do it themselves, they don't go through an apprenticeship and they learn very quickly how difficult the job actually is. It's one thing to read about listening to people and their troubles, and it's another thing to have a person in tears in front of you and to have to try to navigate that situation and make them a cup of tea that will make them feel better and listen to them in a way that will make them feel heard. So I wish we, one, had tea monks, and two, I could be a tea monk. There's this line where it says that when Dex sees the inside of the wagon and walks in for the first time that a knot in their neck that they didn't know about or a knot in their back that they didn't know about just releases because it's such a comfort to be there. And it's like the perfect, safe-feeling space and it's welcoming. I think this is a good time, too, also to mention that tea monks, well, I'm not sure if all tea monks are disciples of the Child God Allalae or just Dex is specifically. We don't have a lot of information necessarily about the theology and the disciples of these different gods and what they do specifically, but Dex is a disciple of what their theology calls a Child God, Allalae, who is the god of small comforts. And I think that's, you know, like I was saying before about the way society works, I think this is built really into the religion as well where there's an emphasis on oneness and also caring for oneself. And so, the tea monk profession is really just about inviting someone in and listening to what they have to say and sitting with them for a while. It's available to everyone in a way that's easily accessible, right? Like Sibling Dex travels around and everybody knows about tea monks, right? The world that they live in is cool. It really emphasizes taking care of each other, I suppose.

A: Yeah, it is impressive. The novella is less than 150 pages, yet the descriptions of the villages and the small moments like Dex walking into their wagon for the first time are just so good. And I think that's one of the things that I love most about this book was how she was able to fit in all these really cozy descriptions to help you get a sense of what Dex is going through and also introduce the different gods and their theology and also discuss like different forms of scholarship and points of view that people take about, you know, life in the world in general. And at the same time, follow this journey that Dex is going through themselves, all in 150 pages. It's just really impressive how she works it out so that at some points, like you mentioned, we're not sure, like, do all tea monks follow Allalae? We don't know, but we kind of put the pieces together ourselves and Becky Chambers gives us just enough, I think, to do that.

E: Yeah, it's very story-heavy and the lore is super fleshed out, which I always appreciate, even in a shorter-form work, because those things stick out to me like a sore thumb. If there's some tidbit about lore that doesn't fold well into the rest of the story, I get irrationally angry. Like, if you're going to give me lore, I want it to be for a reason, right? And I felt like every bit of information that we got colored the world in a way that made sense and was also incredibly intelligent. And I really appreciated sort of the story that was being built through that, especially in between the relationship between, we've talked

about Sibling Dex a lot, but we haven't even talked about our other character, which is: Splendid Speckled Mosschap is our robot friend in this story. And we can talk about that name in a second. But I really appreciated, and a lot of this book is in the form of conversations, right? There is a lot of action that happens and Sibling Dex and Mosschap are going on a physical journey to get to the Hart's Brow Hermitage, which is this place that Sibling Dex finds where crickets might still exist, they don't know. But they have a lot of conversations about the differences in their worlds and the way that robots exist versus the way that humans exist. And also just, I mean, Sibling Dex hasn't seen, hasn't ever seen a robot. Nobody has. In 200 years, they haven't seen any of the robots. Since they left, they never came back. They're sort of rumors and they're kind of things of legend at this point. And so the juxtaposition between Mosschap existing for the sake of existence and the robots having awakened and decided their own purpose versus Sibling Dex, who is struggling very hard to figure out, like, "okay, why am I feeling this existential dread? Where is my sense of purpose?" I appreciated kind of the differences in how those two characters looked at the world. And it really, it made a lot of sense, especially after Mosschap talks about how robots feel about their place in the world and how different that is to how Sibling Dex feels about their place in the world. And I just think for a society post-industrialism, where people maybe had to pick up a lot of slack after the robots left, it's just Sibling Dex has this incredible sort of reverence for Mosschap that I think is funny. And also Mosschap has this incredible reverence for human culture that is also really funny. So I think the world building in this, I appreciate when it happens through those conversations and those juxtapositions of like, okay, this is what human Dex thinks and this is what robot Mosschap thinks. And I liked that a lot.

A: Yeah. I liked the juxtaposition between their two personalities and how it kind of forced Sibling Dex to think deeper about the things where, you know, they're kind of stuck in their head of just like, "what's wrong with me?"

E: Right.

A: I really enjoy their interactions together.

E: Yeah. Mosschap empathizes with Dex in a way that seems a little roundabout sometimes and does really push Sibling Dex to think about these things that maybe they don't want to think about, right? Like they sort of just up and decide to take a trek into the uncharted wilderness because they're feeling really dissatisfied and they want to know if crickets still exist. And to some degree they have this understanding of like, okay, maybe I'm running away from something, but I don't want to think about what I'm possibly running away from. I just want to do this task. I just need to get this thing done. And that's something that I could really relate to, honestly, as a reader, just like sort of knowing that maybe you're doing something that is a little bit, not even necessarily self-destructive, just like kind of reckless, you know, but not really wanting to examine why you're doing that. And so caring so much about the thing at hand and not so much about the reasons behind the thing at hand. I think Mosschap in asking the questions that maybe a human person wouldn't feel are appropriate to ask of another human person, Mosschap doesn't have those sort of like societal expectations of "what is conversationally appropriate?" So they really push Sibling Dex to think about like, okay, why aren't they happy and why are they out here doing this? And, you know, at one point, Dex does kind of finally break down about it and has the opportunity to really examine those feelings and is honest with themselves and honest with Mosschap. And there's a lot of acceptance, I think, from Mosschap in the sense that robots really, from what we, obviously, we speak to one robot in this novel, right? Like we get the opinion of one robot instead of the 2,000-some that are out there. But Mosschap is very willing to just meet Sibling Dex where they are, and understand that, like, feelings just are what they are and things that exist sort of just are what they are, whereas Sibling Dex is really focused on like why, right? And I think that that not only makes for interesting dialogue, but really drives, I think, the point home that Becky Chambers is trying to make in

the end, which is kind of that you're allowed to just exist, you know? And so I think that having these two characters that come from such different worlds makes it sort of easy to get to that conclusion based on their two worldviews. And so I appreciated that too because it's a different way to think about like how would a robot feel if they woke up and gained sentience and they decided that they didn't want to work in the factory anymore? And what would they think about humanity after the fact? And there's one robot, I think it's Speckled, no, Frost Frog? There's a robot. And the robots are named— Sorry, this is important. It's not that important, but it's cute.

A: It is important.

E: The robots are named for the first thing that they see after they've awakened. So for Mosschap, it was the splendid speckled Mosschap mushroom. And then there are other robots named. There's like wolf and fawn, for example. Or like two foxes. But Mosschap talks about this robot that has been in a cave for several decades just watching stalagmites grow. Stalagmites and stalactites, like watching that formation. And other robots are doing more active things, but they don't feel any type of way about either of those choices, right? Like they're very content to just allow one another to sit in a cave for decades at a time and watch stalactites form. Mosschap's main goal is— Mosschap has been sent by the rest of the robots. They had a gathering. It's been 200 years. They kind of want to know what's going on with humanity. Like, are they doing all right? They don't necessarily want to rejoin human society by any means. But Mosschap says, this is a quote from chapter three. He says, “we know that our leaving the factories was a great inconvenience to you. And we wanted to make sure that you've done all right. That society had progressed in a positive direction without us.” And so Mosschap is sent back into human society to answer this question, “what do humans need?” And Sibling Dex is like, “Well, that has a million answers. How are you going to answer this question?” And so Mosschap is very sort of concerned with why Sibling Dex is so far out into the wilderness in the first place. And also, I think part of the reason why they ask such intrusive questions sometimes is that they've been sent on this mission to figure out, “OK, what does humanity need that perhaps robot kind could provide after 200 years of being absent?” Or maybe not even they're looking to provide something. They're just trying to see, “OK, what are they lacking?” And so Mosschap is very concerned about figuring out, “OK, what's going on with Dex? And how can I help them in any way?” And so that sort of dynamic is interesting, too, because Dex is very hard-set on getting to the Hart's Brow Hermitage, getting through the wilderness, and getting to this place. And Mosschap cannot, for the life of them, figure out why. We can't really either, because Dex doesn't really know until the end. And I don't know if Dex ever really figures out why they needed to go so bad.

A: Right, and the fact that they needed to do it on their own. Like for the longest time, they kind of push back against each other. Mosschap's like, “well, I can do this for you. Let me help.” And it's just something that Dex needs to do. And they have it set in their mind to do on their own. And I'm just thinking of all the times where my mother has been like, “here, I'm going to do this for you.” I'm like, “No!” And I don't mean to shout no at my mother, who I love very much. And I get tensed up. And she's asking “Why? I was going to do this thing anyway. And I'll do it for you as well, since I'm already at it.” And it's like, I don't know why, but I have to do this for myself. And I can't give you a good reason for why I just need to do it. But the fact that Mosschap's like, “Well, I'm here to learn about humans. So I'm going to tag along.” And kind of like, that forces its way along on Dex's journey. Because Dex does give in. I guess what I'm trying to say is like, you brought up the mission that Mosschap is on, of finding out what do humans need. And Dex is the first human that it interacts with. And, you know, Dex says, “That's a hard question.” And they don't even know how to answer it themselves. But the answer is they need Mosschap to like, help them come to this conclusion, even though they were so set on not accepting help and doing this on their own. And all of that.

E: Yeah, I think for Sibling Dex, you know, they make this whole career shift sort of not like late in their life, but they're a garden monk for a very long time. And I think they say that they're 29 in the book. And that's described as well past apprenticeship age. So when they do start becoming a tea monk, people that come to see them assume like, "oh, this is a seasoned tea monk." And I think that intense feeling to make a change and to accomplish something different is so familiar to so many people. And I really appreciated how sort of the solution to that, as posed by Chambers is like, lean on other people, right? And talk to somebody about how you're feeling. Because Dex does so much listening, but I don't know if we ever see them—I don't think we ever see them talking to anybody about how they feel, except at the very end to Mosschap. And that probably is too spoilery too. But I think that this book has a lot to say about personhood and purpose and what to do about the feeling of stagnation and why that's not something that can easily be tackled on your own, necessarily. Because Dex does change their vocation and becomes a whole entirely different kind of monk and does a really good job at it, becomes the best tea monk in Panga, and yet still feels this sense of longing and emptiness that can only be sort of fulfilled by confiding in another person, or in this case, a robot, right? But that opportunity to sit down and take a break and feel what you're feeling and to tell somebody else what it is that you're feeling. And I think that that, like you said, is a really important kind of message. And I appreciated that too, because there's so much vulnerability in just feeling what you feel. But if you don't, it can drive you crazy, you know? If you don't give yourself the opportunity to really examine what it is that you feel and why you feel that way, if you just continue to wake up and go to work, you're going to still feel bad.

A: Yeah. And it can be one of those things that just sneaks up on you. We watch Sublime Decks change couriers and become a tea monk, and then it jumps two years later, and they've gotten really good at their job and make people really happy, and they mention that that's all well and good and they acknowledge that they're doing good things for their community. But the thing that they look forward to the most is when they can close the door and hole-up in their wagon at the end of the day and just have quiet, alone time. And that's kind of their way of hoping, and they get to that breaking point of convincing themselves to just go into the wilderness and find this old monastery to see, or Hermitage, to see if there are crickets there. And, yeah I think that you're right. I can't recall any mention of them receiving any similar services as to what they provide as a tea monk, a sense of their view or talking through their problems or thoughts that they're having with anyone else. So they're surrounded by people all day, right? And they get to know these people, and the issues that they're having, and they're really good at, when they come back around to the village again after months, of remembering their tea preferences and also their families and what they've been up to, and specific problems that they were experiencing. But the other person probably doesn't know a whole lot about Sibling Dex.

E: Yeah. I think this is a really good book for anyone who is maybe really community oriented, cares a lot about mutual aid support, but is maybe feeling exhausted with just, sort of, the mechanisms of society. Because Sibling Dex at one point says they do genuinely care about their customers. It's not as if they're checked out. But they want to have time to themselves, right? There's only so much of yourself that you can give before you feel a little empty, right? And I think that this book does a really good job at saying, not only do you not need to feel that way, like you don't need to feel that way, you can confide in somebody else, but also that what you're doing is good enough, right? What you're doing is enough for the people around you. And—oh what's the word I'm looking for—gratification can come from other people, certainly, but at some point there has to be some internal understanding of, like, "Okay, I am okay and the things that I'm doing are okay, and I'm not wasting my potential." So, I think that this is a really good book for, again, somebody who cares a lot about the people around them, and their community, and wants very badly to continue doing meaningful work for other people, but is maybe feeling a little exhausted, and kind of feeling perhaps that, like, "Okay, the work that I'm doing is maybe a little futile." I think that this book has a really good answer for that, and finds it in some fun conversations between a monk and a robot, which is cool.

A: That wraps up our discussion for *A Song for the Wild-Built: a Monk and Robot Book* by Becky Chambers. Join us next episode as we discuss *Lavender House* by Lev A. C. Rosen.

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