

Lavender House 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.



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

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

A: Lev Rosen writes books for people of all ages. Most recently, young adult archaeological adventure, *Lion's Legacy*, and Lambda and Anthony Awards finalist, *Lavender House*, which the New York Times says, movingly explores the strain of trying to pass as straight at a time when living an authentic life could be deadly. He lives in New York City with his husband and a very small cat.

L: (synopsis) *Lavender House*, 1952. The family seat of recently deceased matriarch, Irene Lamontagne, head of the famous Lamontagne Soap Empire. Irene's recipes for her signature scents are a well-guarded secret, but it's not the only one behind these gates. This estate offers a unique freedom where none of the residents or staff hide who they are. But to keep their secret, they've needed to keep others out, and now they're worried they're keeping a murderer in. Irene's widow hires Evander Mills to uncover the truth behind her mysterious death. Andy, recently fired from the San Francisco police after being caught in a raid on a gay bar, is happy to accept. His calendar is wide open. And his secret is the kind of secret the Lamontagnes understand. Andy had never imagined a world like *Lavender House*. He's seduced by the safety and freedom found behind its gates, where a queer family lives honestly and openly. But that honesty doesn't extend to everything, and he quickly finds himself a pawn in a family game of old money, subterfuge, and jealousy. And Irene's death is only the beginning. When your existence is a crime, everything you do is criminal, and the gates of *Lavender House* can't lock out the real world forever. Running a soap empire can be a dirty business.

A: Other important characters are Pearl, who hires Andy to find her wife Irene's murderer. Henry, Pearl and Irene's son, who now runs the Lamontagnes Soap Company. Margot, Henry's wife, to keep up appearances. Elsie, Margot's partner and owner of the Ruby, a gay bar in town. Cliff, Henry's actual partner, who poses as his secretary in public. Alice, Margot's homophobic mother, and three staff members.

L: Some content warnings for this book are self-harm, suicidal thoughts, graphic violence, extreme anti-gay violence, murder, and anti-gay slurs. Alright, Anne, what are your first impressions of *Lavender House*?

A: I'm more of a cozy mystery kind of person, so it took me a little bit to get into that part of it. Some of the violence was pretty violent, but I think it was one of those books that I know that it's going to have a happier ending, so I kind of make it through, you know? What about you?

L: Yeah, it was good. This is not a genre I typically read, mysteries, but it was good. Yeah, the violence was a little... I thought at some point we were going to like fade to black, or like somebody was going to come stop it, and then that didn't happen, and I was like, "Oh, I'm uncomfortable." But I think it was good in the way that it shows what was at stake for these characters in the 1950s being queer in San Francisco. It was sweet at parts. I mean, there obviously was murder. I think it's interesting they hire Andy as a

private investigator because they can't go to the police. You know, if the police sniff around their home, they're going to figure out, "oh, these are a bunch of queers," and obviously that would not be good for them. It was really interesting that it was like, "well, even if we do find the murder, what can we do about it? We can't turn them into the cops." It was a real interesting twist to the story.

A: Yeah, I think part of the frustration, right? Because through the whole thing, I cannot believe it was ever like that. Like, what if you had to call the police? What if you had to call the police, but you couldn't call the police? It was strange because I think anytime in these kind of mystery stories, part of the conflict is that you want to find out who the killer is. And then you want that person to be punished. And it added an extra layer to the drama that they might find out who the person is and not be able to do anything about it. And I don't think it's a spoiler to say the mystery ends by finding out who the killer is, because that's what a mystery is. But you get to the end and it's like, sometimes you do what you can, and maybe it'll work out in the end. I felt like there was, you know, on both levels of a typical mystery, but also in terms of coming to terms with the way the world was, that there can be justice. So there was like a hope at the end of it that had that extra kick to it. Because when you're thinking, things get better. I felt like at the end of the book, I'm like, something has to get better, because I don't know if I could deal with going through all that and not having some kind of resolution. I was really glad when I found out there was a second book that was like, I need more, I need more.

L: Talking about how there's hope. We started and Andy had just been kicked off the force. Coworkers found out he was gay and it was a whole thing. And I mean, he was in a really dark place. And then at the end, there's not only for the family that the book centers around, but for Andy, there's hope for him at the end. Things will get better. If you just stick around and you find your family and you find your thing, like things will get better. And we know like that in life, even though sometimes it feels like it sucks right now, things are better than in the 50's for queer people in America. So they're not they're not this. So there is some hope there. Family is a real interesting theme because only two, three, well, two sets of two are in the book are related by blood. And everyone else is like married in or they're partners or whatever, they're staff. And so I love a found family. That's always my favorite trope. And so, you know, I really like that. And they really emphasize, especially in the book, that sometimes your family is just the family that you find because maybe your family may come out as gay and they don't appreciate that. And so you have to find your own family. And I think that's really sweet. I really liked that. A lot of people, interestingly in the book, didn't want Andy to go through with this. They were like, "we don't want you to investigate Irene's murder. Like we're all family. Like we love each other. And nobody was a murderer. And so how could you even suggest that?" And even as he's bringing proof to the table, they're like, "look, listen, like this is what I think." They didn't want to hear it because they were so protective of each other. I think that was really interesting because you would think that they would want to find out who Irene's murderer was because she was the matriarch of the family or a matriarch of the family. And so they'd want to find out. But they didn't because it would kind of ruin what they have. It was really interesting to get that pushback from them.

A: That's what I was thinking at first, too, when they were talking about the progress of his investigation, that they really didn't want this investigation. You know, except for Pearl, who was like, "I need to know, even if it was one of us, I need to know what happened." And everybody else in the family was like, "I don't even want to know." And it gave me this feeling that sometimes the upside and downside of having that sort of really close-knit family is if something does happen, you're so used to having to hide from the outside world that you kind of think, "I need to keep this secret." It was another one of those interesting kind of layers, how things are the same but different now. Where it's really good to just be able to be, you know, out, you know, and just be able to say, "hey, this is what I'm like" to people, you know, to people who are straight, you know, and cisgender. And to know that there's people who are going to not judge you and you don't have to hide and you don't have to try to keep everything internal or within just a small group of people. It's one of those interesting things that add to that dynamic that not only do the police,

they're not going to help you, but maybe you can't afford to lose what you have with the family that you have by finding out that maybe it was an accident. You know, and now you're going to be able to live with that person if they accidentally, you know, and it's like, can we just leave this alone and pretend it didn't happen? One of those interesting things, because I almost feel like investigating these murders, investigating the family, Andy's really showing how very strong that they all are and how much they care about each other. And in itself, it's almost like, this is what family is like. And because he wanted to give up on his life, right? Like he's ready to die. Little by little, they're like warming his heart. I think, you know, there's one moment where I believe Pearl invites him, near the beginning, you know, where he's like, "you might want to think about working for us, even if you can't figure this out. I kind of like you and I see that you're in a bad place. Come, you know, I'm willing to give you a job, and a chance." And slowly, it's like they're working on his heart, you know, nothing can be done about, you know, what happened to Irene. But he, on the other hand, can have a new life. I feel like we can all empathize, anybody who's different. You know, you can probably empathize, but that's like to come to that point where you're like, I don't have to get stuck in the cycle of people who don't accept me. My biological family didn't accept me, you know, the way I am. I can, you know, find other people who will be like, hey, I don't necessarily need to understand everything, but it's okay. You know, I'm not here to judge you. And so, yeah, a murder mystery, but also like a found family thing.

L: You're looking forward to the next one?

A: Oh, my goodness. Yeah.

L: I don't know anything about the next one, except that there is a next one.

A: It's *the Bell in the Fog*. Yeah, it's coming out in October.

L: The description said that it was like a *Knives Out*, but queer. And it kind of is in this way. I mean, the plot twist was not, nothing is like the plot twist in *Knives Out*, but it reminds me of Daniel Craig's character, Benoit Blanc, just a detective going around solving crimes. That wraps up our discussion of *Lavender House* by Lev Rosen. Join us next week as we discuss *Iron Widow* by Xiran Jay Zhao.

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