

***What Moves the Dead* 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. My pronouns are any.

Em: My name is Em and I use they/them pronouns. Today we are going to be talking about *What Moves the Dead* by T. Kingfisher.

A: So who is T. Kingfisher? According to fantasticfiction.com, T. Kingfisher is the vaguely absurd pen name of Ursula Verning. In another life, she writes children's books and weird comics and has won the Hugo, Sequoia, and Ursa Major awards, as well as half-dozen junior library guild selections. This is the name she uses when writing for grown-ups. When she is not writing, she is probably out in the garden, trying to make eye contact with butterflies. Ursula Verning, I first came across when my teenage son was a small child, and we read *Hamster Princess*, so shock and awe that this is the same person.

E: This is also a description from fantasticfiction.com, and *What Moves the Dead* is an Instant USA Today and Indie Bestseller. It was the winner of the Locus Award for Best Horror Novel in 2023. From the multi-award-winning author of *The Twisted Ones* comes *What Moves the Dead*, a gripping and atmospheric retelling of Edgar Allan Poe's classic *The Fall of the House of Usher*. When Alex Easton, a retired soldier, receives word that their childhood friend Madeline Usher is dying, they race to the ancestral home of the Ushers in the remote countryside of Ruritania. What they find there is a nightmare of fungal growths and possessed wildlife surrounding a dark, pulsing lake. Madeline sleepwalks and speaks in strange voices at night, and her brother Roderick is consumed with the mysterious malady of the nerves. Aided by a redoubtable British mycologist and a baffled American doctor, Alex must unravel the secret of the House of Usher before it consumes them all. And a few content warnings for this book. Deterioration of mental health, there's some light body horror, light gore, and Annika wants everyone to know that the bunnies are really creepy. They're super scary. If you're a bunny lover, like you can read this book, but you're not going to be happy about the way the bunnies appear in this novel.

A: True, it's very true.

E: What did you think of this book, Annika? First impressions.

A: My goodness. So I read this book before we had the discussion of what books to choose for this podcast, and my goodness, I just jumped on the chance to have to talk to somebody about this. This is a first book by T. Kingfisher that I've read, and frankly, I'm going to read more. But just stunning. For such a tiny book, it's so meaty in a horrible and rotting kind of way.

E: Yeah, that's a great way to describe it. I'm so glad that you not only suggested this as a read, but also now that I get to talk with you about it, because I think that you like these kinds of books from what I know about you, and I really do too. So I like talking about sort of like the crunchy, spooky stuff, and I'm glad that you brought this to the podcast, because it's really like, this is a book you could sit and read in one sitting if you've got like a lot of time on a weekend. I listened to the audiobook version. I think the audiobook version is only four or five hours long. So it's really not a bulky book, but there is a lot inside, which I think is really cool about it. Yeah, it is a very meaty, gory, gory little novel. So yeah, I think that was a pretty apt description of this little horrible story. Not horrible just like objectively from a writing perspective, but horrible from like the character's perspective. Like if I was Easton, I'd be losing it. I would not, I don't know what I would do, but I don't think I would be as

gung-ho about finding the source of the problem. I think I would just be like, "I need to get my friends out of here ASAP as possible. Like we need to go."

A: They're so chill. They're just like, yeah, these things are happening, but I guess that's just how it goes. I mean, by the end, they're a lot more excited about things, but still... I guess there's a perfect character because any other person would have just hightailed it out of there.

E: Yeah, I think that's a really good segue into talking about the characters also too. Because we don't have that many. I have six people on my list. So if I forgot anybody, please remind me. But I have Alex Easton, who is sort of our main character, the one who gets called back to Ruritania to save their friend and figure out what's going on. Then we've got Roderick Usher and Madeline Usher, who are sort of the stewards of the house. Angus, who is their groundskeeper. Denton, who, he's an American. Everybody else is not American, but he's an American, which I think is funny, because, just of the way that Easton talks about the American and the way the other characters talk about this American doctor who's just there. But I don't remember why he's there. Does Roderick call him in to try to help with Madeline? Why is he there?

A: Yeah, so he was a surgeon in the American Civil War. And apparently because of that, Roderick's like, "you know who would be perfect to find out what this crazy illness is? Some guy that used to hack off limbs." So yeah, he's a doctor, I guess.

E: Okay, that makes sense. Especially sort of within the context of this being like, they don't know what's going on, so they're looking for all the help that they can get.

A: Right.

E: And then one last character, very important. My personal favorite, just by the nature of what she does and who she is, is Eugenia Potter, who is a mycologist on the grounds, who is just trying to figure out the source. She's really into mushrooms and plants. And her whole thing is that the Mycology Society is predominantly run and operated by men, and they won't let her in without an incredible discovery. So she's obsessed with the idea of what's going on with the Usher sort of property, because there's these strange fungal growths that nobody's really seen before, and the animals act super weird. And I just think she's a delight. I think she's very funny. I love her. She doesn't really care about what's, I mean, she cares about what's going on, but she's way more concerned with the mushrooms than anything else, and I love that for her.

A: I love a character of a certain age, as they say. Eventually, she was outed as being about 60. But I love a sort of older lady character who just does not care and just does what she wants. And she definitely fills that role.

E: Yeah, she's got her own stuff going on, and she'll certainly come along for the ride, but she's not invested in it, you know?

A: Right. Even though, weirdly, she does end up being like their best source of information.

E: If only they had just asked her a few more questions at the start. I don't know if they would have been able to avoid anything that ends up happening, because...

A: I don't know. It was pretty well in the mix at that point.

E: Yeah, the situation is fairly evolved by then.

A: Yeah, right.

E: So obviously, this is a new take, an updated take on Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*, which is just a classic long form tale of horror. And this is a question that you posed, Annika. Do you need to read the source material, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, in order to read this book?

A: Well, I read it because, you know, as any good child goth, I thought Edgar Allan Poe was the best thing in the world. So of course, I read this as a high schooler. But have you read it?

E: Yeah, it had been quite a long time since I had read it. I think I probably also read it in high school, or maybe just on my own. I reread it after I finished the novel, because I was like, well, I have to now. You know, I just read this new rendition. I have to see. It's been a while since I read the original. But yeah, I don't think you have to. I think that this stands really well on its own. But reading the original is just a nice sort of kind of supplementary text, especially if you haven't read it in a while.

A: Yeah, because I hadn't read it since high school either. So I read it, and I was shocked that it was like two 8 by 10 pages typed about length. And I was like, boy, it really felt longer when I read it before. But it was so easy to just read it afterward. And the amount of things that T. Kingfisher took from the original, it was super, super sparse, but then turned into something that was just so much worse. You don't have to read it. But if you read this book and then read *The Fall of the House of Usher*, I feel like you will appreciate the source material.

E: Yeah, I agree wholeheartedly. I think the best thing that T. Kingfisher did was sort of capture that air of impending doom. Like you open on *The Fall of the House of Usher*, the original, and it starts off like, this is a terrible house. You don't want to be here. I saw this house. It filled me with dread. It filled me with woe. I want nothing to do with this place. It's awful. And that really comes across almost right away, I think, in this novel, in *What Moves the Dead*, because Easton is really skeeved out by this place. And they've been there as a child, like they're old friends with Roderick and Madeline. And the air of the house is just terrible. They do not want to be there. And I think that is really well done, just because, again, like you said, the original source material is very short. And this novel is also short. We've talked about that a little bit already. But to expound upon something that was really short in the first place, to make something that is, like the world building in this is really good, I think. There are a lot of hints as to what's going on. But I think the general air of mystery and overwhelming dread as to what's to come is really apparent in this. And I don't want to say I appreciated it because it freaked me out a little bit. But I do, you know, I love an atmosphere.

A: I also loved that this book took the original descriptions of the characters, which were probably just like, ooh, look, it's creepy and gave it a why. Because, you know, not to give you too many spoilers, but like the wild hair and all the colorlessness and all that has reasons.

E: Yes, I loved that aspect was that these tiny little details now have a discernible reason. And, you know, this grand, horrible mystery has a source. And the way that that sort of gets discovered is very, I don't want to say organic necessarily, but.

A: Oh, but it is.

E: Yeah. But yeah, I think that having a reason for all of these things is really, it ties the whole novel together. It makes me want to pick an old classic something and write a short form novella about it because I'm, yeah, just all those little details that T. Kingfisher picked out of the original and made into something like a much grander mystery. That was cool. I liked that a lot. Something in this book that I enjoyed quite a bit is the idea of gender in this story is really interesting. Main character Easton is gender neutral by nature of their profession. The novel presents the idea that soldiers are gender neutral, which is interesting, really fascinating because Roderick and Madeline are familiar with this concept from like a cultural understanding, but Denton, the American doctor doesn't quite get it. I mean, he's heard of it, but he has a little trouble at the beginning. And it's sort of interesting seeing the way that these social dynamics play out as this group is trying to figure out the mystery. Yeah, I don't know. What do you want to say about this, Annika?

A: So yes, how cool is it that this book has its own idea of pronouns and gender? I have here all of the different pronouns. They have pronouns for she and he, as usual, but then they have ba and ban, which is used just for children and the church. And then ka and kan, which is Easton's pronouns, which means soldier. I have a quote here, it says, "they hand you a sword and a new set of pronouns when you sign up to be a soldier." So I just found that really fascinating that in order to become a soldier, you just give up everything you used to be to become a soldier, including your pronouns. And that just is really kind of cool. Especially the gender neutral for children as well. It's not really mentioned a whole lot in there, but I just love that added part. The siblings do use that for each other sometimes, because apparently siblings use that in these countries amongst themselves as they grow up. And there's a whole section on how it came to be, sworn soldiers, and that's what the people who give up their gender to become soldiers are called "sworn soldiers." So it apparently all started with one person who wanted to become a soldier and they didn't pick her out after a while. And so eventually they just, everybody became ka.

E: I agree with you. I think it's really fascinating how pronouns are used in this book, specifically within the context of like a military organization, because we know for a fact in the real world that gender dynamics really affect the way that a military group operates, right? Like we know there's a lot of research done about what happens when you introduce gender politics into a military organization. And so the idea that this country has completely removed that by nature of sort of just taking away pronouns writ large, I think that's a really interesting way to sort of combat that issue. And the way that people treat Easton as a result is really, I don't know, it's fascinating. And we don't get any sort of biological clues. I don't think about Easton's biological gender, but I don't think that matters, right? Because the idea is that soldiers are gender neutral and children are gender neutral. And this cultural idea that certain groups don't have any sort of gender roles assigned to them or gender rules assigned to them, specifically children and the military, like that is a fascinating world to create because that's where we see a lot of those gender roles enforced, particularly in children, particularly in those systems of power, right? So it's such a small thing to do within this— Well, it's a very large statement to make, right? But contextually, it feels really small, right? Except when Denton is sort of talking about, I'm not super familiar with sworn soldiers and this is kind of new to me. But as a queer reader, it's like, oh yeah, this makes sense.

A: Yeah. It's just nice to have a book in which gender is kind of like, "what's happening? Whatever."

E: It's interesting too, the conversations that Easton and Eugenia have, where Eugenia is still sort of beholden to these really strict gender expectations. The fact that she can't join the mycology society because she's a woman and they don't really take her discoveries, they don't give her as much credit as they do her male counterparts. Whereas Easton sort of commands this respect just by the nature of being a sworn soldier. And I think that's interesting because these problems of societal gender expectations obviously aren't gone because Eugenia still feels them. But there are aspects of society that have taken that out of the equation to some degree. And I would like to see how that plays out in other scenarios. You know what I mean? I think too, Roderick struggles with this a little bit because he is trying to maintain the estate despite the fact that they don't have any money anymore. Obviously something's going on. He's sick, his sister is sick, but he still feels beholden to this place. He doesn't want to leave his ancestral family home. And I think that that's a very sort of masculine, kind of male, like he's the son, right? He has to take care of the house. He has to take care of his sister. When he could just leave, you know?

A: Especially for the time period that this book is apparently set in. Eugenia feels very Victorian. So yeah, for that time period, the guy is expected to stay at the house and keep it up. So yeah, that is true.

E: That's a good point. I forget that this is not set in the present day, but yeah, it's olden times. So that does make sense what you said. It would be more of an expectation for Roderick to maintain the estate than as opposed to now when he could maybe just sell it. So this property, obviously, we've talked about it being reallyooky-spooky. Part of it is this atmosphere that T. Kingfisher has created.

And part of it is just the physical environment, right? Like we've already talked about the bunnies. They're weird. There's mushrooms all over the place that Easton has not seen before. And Eugenia, our mycologist, she's sort of fascinated by. And this is, I don't know, to me, it felt like there's certainly a level of fantasy here. Like you have to suspend the realm of disbelief a little bit, but also because of the nature of the biology and how other things in our real-world nature work. But it felt very like *The Last of Us* to me, which I think is also a really interesting adaptation of how fungus works and how fungus infects other things. What do you think? Did this make you scared of mushrooms and moving bunnies in the woods?

A: There's a quote in here. I'm not going to read it exactly because I can't remember where it is. But at one point, Eugenia says, mushrooms and fungi are with us at all times, you're breathing them right now. And I'm like, what? This could happen to me? Because I mean, off the record, this could absolutely happen. There is a type of fungus that does exactly this thing. And it's terrifying. But for the record, yes, it's terrifying to think that this thing is that mushrooms and funguses and really other things you can't see are around you at all times. And they could affect you in really big ways. And yeah, I feel like T. Kingfisher did that feeling of dread really well.

E: I think something that really adds to that too is the idea that this has been happening for a really, really, really long time. And it got to the point that it was so bad that something had to be done. And what really frightened me is, yeah, not only are spores around us all the time, but they can be affecting you for a long period of time. And you might not know until your hair starts changing and you're mentally sort of all over the place because of what's in the air. Like that is a really harrowing concept. And I think, yeah, something that T. Kingfisher does very well in just explaining how Easton moves about the grounds and sort of takes everything in. We haven't even talked about the lake, which is, there's a really disgusting lake on the property that just Easton looks at it and it feels like it's pulsating, right? So you know something's up with this lake from the jump basically, but you don't know exactly what. And I think that that does a really good job of sort of driving this kind of biologically based fear that is like something in my environment is awry, but I can't put my finger on it. And I think that comes about in a way that is a really interesting conclusion to the story, right? Like even if you think you know what's going on, I guarantee you that you don't. Like I had a pretty good idea of like what was happening and then it got to the end and I was like, oh, there's more to this that I don't know how to take. Like the ending adds sort of an extra punch that again, even if you think you know exactly what's happening, it's an interesting ending.

A: Absolutely. And mildly open-ended, not to give any spoilers or anything, but mildly open-ended.

E: Oh, do we want to talk about the writing style?

A: Absolutely. So I actually already have my book sitting open to an example of both dry humor and amazing ways of saying things. Because it's when Easton first gets there, the servant is there and says, "Would you like to come inside?" "Yes," I said, aware that I was lying. I did not want to go into that tired house dripping with fungi and architectural eyes." And isn't that just gorgeous? Both the dry humor there and the interesting way of describing something.

E: Easton as a character is really funny because they're super not about this task. They feel this sort of moral obligation because their childhood friends are really going through it, like really going through it in this dilapidated, scary house. And yeah, Easton really doesn't want to be here. They want to leave pretty bad, but they are so compelled to figure out like what is going on with my friends and with these grounds. And that, yeah, that does come across in a way that is really funny a lot of the time. Angus is another character who I thought was just really hysterical. He is another one that's like, yeah, this place is bad. Don't drink the water. Don't like eat the fish. This place is not good, but we're here. The dialogue is really quippy a lot of the time between some of these characters. Obviously, some of them have a little bit more going on upstairs than others do, and they maybe have less of a penchant for humor than the other people. But yeah, it's, I think, sorry, go ahead.

A: I feel like the ones that don't have as much going on really can't help that.

E: Yeah, it's not their fault. But yeah, I think the juxtaposition of sort of this quippy dialogue about how terrible the place is with these sometimes long and sometimes short sentences about the doom, like the air of doom and gloom that is this place, I think come together in a really... it's very readable. It goes really quickly, not just because it's a very short text, but I think just, yeah, the nature of the writing makes it really easy to read. And it's so compelling. It's very gripping.

A: Absolutely.

E: The way she writes the wildlife, especially, the scenes with the rabbits are so awful.

A: They're so unsettling, but at the same time, it's so, you just kind of accept it because she's written it so well that you don't question anything.

E: Yeah, it's really easy to take the plot at face value because it makes sense, right? Like the atmosphere sort of lends itself to like, okay, yeah, I believe this. It makes sense. The way these things are described totally tracks. And yeah, it's certainly a fantastical horror, but again, it is very believable. And actually there's, did you know that there was a sequel coming out? Because I did not.

A: Yeah, I had no idea until I saw it in your outline here.

E: Yeah. So I'm going to read the description for that really quickly because it also seems like compelling and good. And I'm really looking forward to it. It doesn't come out until next year, but I love having things to look forward to, especially spooky-ooky books. So here's the description for the sequel to *What Moves the Dead*, which is available in 2024. Retired soldier Alex Easton returns in a horrifying new adventure. After their terrifying ordeal at the Usher Manor, Alex Easton feels as if they've just survived another war. All they crave is rest, routine, and sunshine. But instead, as a favor to Angus and Miss Potter, they find themselves heading to their family hunting lodge deep in the cold, damp forests of their home country, Galatia. In theory, one can find relaxation in even the coldest and dampest of Galatian autumns. But when Easton arrives, they find the caretaker dead, the lodge in disarray, and the grounds troubled by a strange, uncanny silence. The villagers whisper that a breath-stealing monster from folklore has taken up residence in Easton's home. Easton knows better than to put too much stock in local superstitions, but they can tell that something is not quite right in their house or in their dreams. So yeah, I'm really excited for that.

A: The fact that Miss Potter, Virginia Potter, gets to still stay, yes.

E: Yes, to see a future for Angus and Miss Potter, even if it's having to fight another ooky-spooky, is like, that's fine. Well, maybe not for them. They might not think it's fine, but for me as a reader, I am tickled that I get to see them in another supernatural situation.

A: I feel like she's up to it and Angus is probably up to it.

E: Oh yeah, most definitely.

A: Yeah, the skeptic just keeps getting these situations where they're like, that can't be real.

E: Just those two characters specifically are so, they're so rooted in the natural world around them. So it's really interesting to see how they go about navigating some supernatural force or some perceived supernatural force, right? Yeah, they're very sort of objective, I think. And yeah, they're just, they're funny. I like them a lot.

A: Oh, I did want to mention that since we often say that our authors are own-voices, this is one of the authors that we could not confirm our own-voices for, and we don't want to give the impression that she is queer.

E: Thank you for saying that! Yeah it's always a little bit tough, because we want to read own-voice stories, but sometimes there's a really good, interesting discussions of pronouns and gender, or these queer theory concepts that are taken in interesting ways and interesting directions by authors that we can't necessarily confirm or deny whether or not they're part of the community. But that doesn't mean that we can't talk about them.

A: That wraps our discussion of *What Moves the Dead* by T. Kingfisher. Join us nex episode as we discuss *Felix Ever After* by Kacen Callender.



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 you're interested in this episode's selection, consider borrowing from your local library. Thanks for listening!