

Felix Ever After 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.



Dani: My name is Dani and I go by they/them pronouns.

Ashley: Hi, I'm Ashley and I go by she/her or they/them pronouns. So today we're *discussing Felix Ever After* by Kacen Callender. Kacen Callender is a St. Tomman author of children's fiction and fantasy, best known for their Stonewall Book Award and Lambda Literary Award winning middle grade debut, *Hurricane Child*. Their fantasy novel, *Queen of the Conquered*, is a 2020 winner of the World Fantasy Award and King of the Dragonflies won the 2020 National Book Award for Young People's Literature. Callender is Black, queer, trans and uses they/them and he/him pronouns.

D: Felix Love has never been in love. And yes, he's painfully aware of the irony. He desperately wants to know what it's like and why it seems so easy for everyone but him to find someone. What's worse is that even though he is proud of his identity, Felix also secretly fears that he's one marginalization too many—Black, queer and transgender—to ever get his own happily ever after. When an anonymous student begins sending him transphobic messages after publicly posting Felix's dead name alongside images of him before he transitioned, Felix comes up with a plan for revenge. What he didn't count on: his catfish scenario landing him in a quasi-love triangle... But as he navigates his complicated feelings, Felix begins a journey of questioning and self-discovery that helps redefine his most important relationship: how he feels about himself. *Felix Ever After* is an honest and layered story about identity, falling in love and recognizing the love you deserve.

A: Just to introduce the prominent characters of the book that we'll probably be talking about quite a lot so listeners can follow along. Felix, who we mentioned, is a Black trans boy who is the protagonist of our story. We also will be talking about Ezra, who is Felix's best friend, and Declan, who is the third part of the love triangle, is a fellow student of Felix and Ezra's, had previously dated Ezra. So there's that little bit of a backstory there and Felix and Declan kind of clash and don't get along very well.

D: And there's content warnings: transphobia, bullying and mention of self-harm.

A: Alright. So to jump on in, Dani, what was your initial expectations before reading? Did you have any?

D: At first, I thought it was just going to be like a silly, lighthearted queer read. But then once you get into it, no, it's not. There's a lot more. I remember talking about it with somebody else, I think it was one of the co-workers at the library. And she said that she didn't like all the bullying and transphobia and she couldn't get through a good section of it. But yeah, it was really good.

A: Yeah, I had a similar experience, especially when you look at the cover. It's gorgeous. It makes you feel really, really happy inside just looking at it. And the joy on Felix's face on the cover. And then, yeah, similarly jumped into it thinking it'd be a fun, you know, easy young adult book. But it really goes in depth in some of these tough topics, which I thought was well done. But yeah, I did see a couple of reviews. Like I think Kirkus, when they reviewed it, they said it was just too heavy, like too much. But then, you know, you see mixed reviews, but overall, I enjoyed it. I read it when it first came out a couple of years ago. And rereading it, I was like, oh, wow, yeah, I forgot how heavy this can be. But definitely worthwhile reading. Yeah.

D: Yeah, it is. And I read it during like a period where I was like figuring out if I was non-binary or not. And once I finished it, it was like, oh, yeah, I'm definitely that. This is a huge relief. So it definitely helped me figure out my own identity. So I love it for that.

A: Yeah, that's wonderful. I think I had already come to peace with like my gender identity before reading it. But the experiences that he's going through of that self-doubt and then also the fluidness of gender identity and kind of trying to navigate that was very, very relatable. And so, you know, when we start the book, Felix has already transitioned and is taking T, got top surgery, and all of that, and was feeling very confident in that, knew always that he was trans. But he mentions to his best friend and to the support group at an LGBTQ+ center that, what do you call it if for the most part, you know that you're a boy, but sometimes that doesn't quite fit? So it was really affirming, I think, to see that in the book.

D: Yeah, I feel like every queer person goes through that struggle where they feel like they have to be just solely masculine or solely feminine and nothing in between or not something one day and not something the next day. And this definitely like dives into that and explains it more. Like at first I was like, what's a demiboy? But I'm glad the book explained it. What do you think of Felix's journey of self-love and self-worth throughout the book?

A: I think it ties in with his figuring out his queer identity, his gender identity of being a trans boy, but also finding that term, like you mentioned, Dani, demiboy. I think there are a lot of things that tied into it, that confusion of his gender, but the, you know, knowing that he is trans, but also comparing himself to his classmates, having never been kissed himself and having been in a relationship that ended really, really poorly with another classmate. She made a comment that...

D: He was not a feminist because he was trans.

A: Yes, which is wild. Of course, that's not true at all, but kind of left him feeling really bad. And of course he knows that's not true, but these external factors of that negative relationship that he had, but also comparing himself to positive relationships that he sees amongst his friends throughout the story. And it starts pretty early where he writes these emails to his mom who left him and his dad. He never sends them, but, you know, obviously coming to terms with the loss of his mother who just suddenly up and left them. So I think there are a lot of things that were kind of weighing down on Felix.

D: Yeah, I think this book is just all about fluidity, like his relationship with Ezra and about how they do things that are like outside of the scope of friendship. And then you also have him battling his identity and then his issues with his mother and father. It's just not everything in this book is like cut straight through. Like it's on the fringes, if that makes sense.

A: Yeah, definitely. It's complicated.

D: Yeah, that's a good word for it.

A: Which, you know, is I think rings very true to at least my high school journey, all the, you know, drama and also trying to figure out who you are and all of that.

D: And with his ex, the girl that he dated, I forgot her name. But that also brings up another topic. It was really popular in like the early 2010s where there was a whole bunch of feminists talking about how trans people obviously don't love themselves if they're transitioning and how they must all hate women. I don't know if you remember that.

A: Yeah, Terfs.

D: Yeah. It completely went over my head. I was like, what are they called again?

A: I don't know. I have to really think what that means. Trans exclusionary...

D: Radical.

A: Radical, yes. ...radical feminist. Yeah.

D: But yeah, I'm glad they talked about that topic because I rarely see it talked about today. I feel like a lot of people just forgot about it unless somebody like randomly brings it up.

A: Right. But it's still prevalent. There are still a lot of people who think that way.

D: Unfortunately.

A: And part of me wonders, you know, I kind of want to do a deep dive into interviews with Case and Calendar because right before they published this book, they came out as non-binary using they/them, he/him pronouns. Kind of wonder like how much from their own personal experiences that Case and Calendar pulled into the book.

D: I didn't know that. How do you feel about the healthy and unhealthy relationships like with Felix, Ezra, the clan, his dad?

A: Yeah, we kind of alluded to it a little bit, but the love triangle.

D: So complicated. In high school.

A: Yeah, I was in band in high school. And I feel like listening to all my friends who were in marching band that I was not a part of. I was like, whoa, this is yeah. I mean, like a little one of those bulletin boards with people's photos and strings connecting.

A: Yeah. Definitely like an art or theater kid thing.

[laughter]

A: I mean, you're with each other all the time.

D: The kids in this book, they're just all running around, never at home.

A: I know there's like no parental oversight. Yeah, I think it definitely helps that Felix's best friend, Ezra, has his own apartment that his parents bought for him so he could be like close to school. So yeah, Felix spends a lot of time there. And his dad mentions at one point, like, hey, I know I said that it's okay for you to stay the night at Ezra's every once in a while, but I thought that meant like once a week, twice a week. I see you maybe once a week. Can we fix this?

D: I don't think any of their relationships were necessarily unhealthy, just like misinformed. Yeah. And that made them say things or do things that weren't the best.

A: Yeah. Yeah, that's true. And I feel like they were messy teens, right, which is fun and pretty realistic. But man, sometimes when I read these young adult books, I'm like, I wish that when I was that age, my emotional intelligence was as high as them. Because we mentioned it before, but Felix, Ezra, and Declan are kind of in this love triangle situation, right, where Felix and Ezra are best friends. Ezra and Declan used to date. And Felix is, throughout the story, catfishing Declan. And then they end up getting really close and have feelings for each other. But only Felix knows that he's talking to Declan. Declan doesn't know who he's talking to, which I think multiple times, Ezra has, you know, been like, is this a good idea? You're still doing this, but messy teens doing messy stuff.

But in the end, I enjoyed that there was that communication and kind of some closure and acknowledgement. And like, hey, what we're doing right now probably isn't so great for either of us.

D: Yeah, I don't see myself being that young and being that mature. I feel like that's really telling of kids nowadays, though, like teenagers. I feel like they're more mature than I was back then. They're more aware of their surroundings, the social issues.

A: Yeah, for sure. Sometimes I hear about what kids are doing locally, I'm like, oh, my gosh, like way too focused on my own little world. I don't know.

D: Yeah, I was worried about, like, the next GTA release or something like that. Worried about things going on outside.

[laughter]

A: Oh, yes. Oh, my gosh. Yes. Yeah. I guess there aren't really very, like, necessarily unhealthy relationships. Yeah, it's just kind of navigating love for the first time and, you know, what kind of love you want to receive and all of that. Because I think when Felix and Declan opened up to each other and got really close, like, there was that little bit of protection, you know, for Felix that Declan didn't know who he was. So it felt probably a little safer than, you know, acknowledging his feelings for another student that may or may not be pretty obvious to the reader.

D: I feel like most of it is pretty obvious, like, right in your face. And, like, his relationship with his dad, at first when I was reading, I was like, wow, gee, he's not the best. But I feel like as you get older, you realize that sometimes coming out to certain people, it takes a lot for them to digest. Like, they're not going to understand it from the get go. And there's not something completely wrong with that, but there's nothing, like, completely right about it either. I think his dad was just trying his best.

A: Yeah, that was tough, right? Because it's very clear that Felix's dad loves him a lot and supported him through the transition, funded his transition and medical care and, you know, found him a support group and all of that. But what really was hard for Felix to get past was the fact that his dad didn't often say his name, Felix. What would he call him?

D: I think just his daughter.

A: Yeah, like 'kid' and like, did everything to avoid verbally acknowledging it, even though he, you know, financially funded it and was very supportive of the whole situation. And yeah, I'm sure as a parent, you know, that's a big transition too. And when, you know, you yourself are going through it and thinking about it as a queer person, like that's, you know, on your mind all the time. And, you know, you're with yourself through that journey from step one. And, you know, you probably don't tell your parent until like way down the road when you're like comfortable and ready to do that. And so it's newer for his dad. So, yeah, it was complicated, right? And kind of tough to read sometimes because clearly his dad loves him a lot. But there's still that one little barrier that they need to get over for Felix to feel like truly accepted by him.

D: Yeah. Even when friends come out to you, it's hard to like transition to using the correct pronouns for them. Not in a bad way. It's just getting used to that.

A: Right, right. Absolutely. Because it's just your brain, like making quick— It's almost a habit, right? Of using like certain pronouns for someone and making that switch can be, yeah, can be hard just at first. And then once you get used to it, like, yeah, of course. Yeah.

D: Yeah. Because I remember the other day one of my friends misgendered me. And at first I was like, wow, that's kind of hurtful. But then you have to like stop and think that like everybody makes mistakes and it's not intentional all the time.

A: Right. Yeah. I feel like, you know, and it's intentional and that's not OK. And that can be, you know. So when I hear other queer people slip up like, oh, OK. Like that's, you know, it happens to other people, too. But it's OK. I think generally most people are understanding of that. But for Felix's dad, I don't know. It's not mentioned, but I assume this is like the first relationship he has with personal relationship with someone who's trans. And so navigating that for the first time can especially be work to do, right? And then it being your own child. I don't know. I'm not a parent. So I imagine that would be. Yeah, I imagine that would take some time.

D: Yeah. And him being from like an older generation where they're not used to that type of stuff.

A: The book takes place during summer. Felix, Ezra, Declan and all their— I want to say co-workers, but that's not right—their fellow, their peers, their fellow students. So everyone, they're all rising seniors, right? It's the summer before the senior year. And during the summer they are participating in artist summer school?

D: I think that's basically what it is.

A: Yeah. Right? Kind of like a camp. I don't know. But so like all the rising seniors are there's this expectation for them to use the time to work towards their portfolio, their senior portfolio, which some of them will use for college applications. And so Felix is exploring and kind of navigating all these other things personally with his identity and relationships and stuff. He's also experiencing creative block. So for the beginning part of the summer, he's not able to, I don't want to say focus, but he hasn't found...

D: The balance.

A: Yeah. Yes. Thank you. Yeah. The balance and like overarching idea for his portfolio.

D: Yeah. Creative block can be so annoying. I used to paint like every day and now I haven't painted for like a good couple of months. Like trying to find that balance between like life and doing your hobbies or doing something that you want to like make your career. It's really hard. And I like looking at everybody's different creative journeys throughout the book, like Declan's, Ezra's and Felix's.

A: Yeah, I'm trying to think what Ezra's is.

D: Ezra, they said that he could like do anything art wise. I don't think there was a specific thing because they said he could do film, photography, acrylic. I think they were just all combined.

A: Oh, OK.

D: Yeah. And didn't he do modeling, too?

A: Yes, that's right. OK. Yeah. The start, he was modeling and did he create like the outfits to like the fashion for the photo shoot?

D: Yeah.

A: He's one of those people who can do everything.

D: I wish. But yeah, I like that creative aspect.

A: Yeah, that was fun to follow along. And Felix is kind of figuring things out personally. His creative flow kind of opens up a little bit more and he starts out with this series of self-portraits.

And that was one thing that his art teacher mentioned is that he's really good at portraits, right? Of all his friends and, not his co-workers, his fellow students. So he's really good at capturing people's like inner selves and like their expressions and all of that. But she asked, like, why don't you ever do any self-portraits? And part of me kind of wonders if it's because he's having like this inner battle of, you know, who he is. And so watching him figure that out and as a result, start developing these self-portraits was really fun. And the descriptions that Kacen Callender does of the process. They were so good of like the colors that he was jumping into and the idea of like, isn't it? I don't know. You're a painter, so you would know. There's like creative flow that you get into, right? Like the zone. I don't know. Did you feel that in those descriptions?

D: Yeah, I really like the descriptions. I wish there was like pictures in the book.

A: Right.

D: Yeah. It's so nice.

A: I think that's like what the cover is supposed to be, one of his self-portraits, right?

D: Yeah, I definitely think it's tied to his identity because it gives me like the same impression. Like when people aren't all there with their identity or who they want to be and they have like issues taking selfies and uploading them. I think it gives like the same feeling as that. How did you feel about the support group?

A: I thought that was an interesting thing to add in because it's such a minor thing in the book. But I wanted to bring it up in our discussion because I think it's only mentioned twice. He goes once, like towards the beginning, sits and listens and then is addressed by someone else. And he's just like, you know what? I got to bounce. And he just like leaves in the middle of the group and like felt super uncomfortable and all of that. But then towards the end, goes back, right, and participates more actively. And I just really appreciated that because obviously he transitioned months prior to the start of this book. You know, has been going through this journey for a while now. But finding that support and like being open to accepting support from others in the queer community is, it can be really tough, right? And admitting that you need that kind of support from other people. That's something that I've struggled with in the past. And so I just really appreciated, you know, knowing that this is a young adult book that teens are going to read, you know, and seeing that in a book represented.

D: Yeah, definitely. It's hard asking for like regular help, like mental help. But then when you add that queer aspect and being judged within the community, because there's a lot of issues in the community. It's definitely hard. Like this past weekend, I just like told one of my friends that I was changing my pronouns and I was so worried about it. And they were like, oh, okay. And just made up like a silly rhyme about it. But yeah, it's so tough.

A: Oh, that's awesome. But yeah, you like build it up in your head like, oh, they're gonna, you know, not be accepting or they're like gonna push back and all this stuff. You like build up this, I don't know, I do sometimes like build up these like make-believe conversations and arguments that I have with people. And it like never ends up that way. And it's usually fine. But Felix does get that kind of pushback, though, from other students about transness and what that means and the validity of his identity. And a couple of comments from people throughout using his transness as like a shield from criticism, I guess.

D: Yeah.

A: So having to deal with that, but then going into this support group and seeing, you know, some of them are older, right? Pretty badass queer people and learning from them. Both sides of things are shown in the book, which I just thought that was really nice.

D: I remember there was one part of the book where his harasser was saying how he wasn't a boy. And then he was panicking, thinking that they knew that he was questioning his identity. And it was really sad.

A: Those exchanges between him and the anonymous bully were really, really hard to read because it was just brutal. Obviously, those are the types of things that people say to trans people in real life. Those are not wildly out-there statements that people have to put up with. Yeah, that was probably the toughest aspect of the book for me to digest. And luckily, that was...

D: Brief.

A: Yes.

D: Wasn't there some scenes where at the support group, some trans people were talking about how non-binary people aren't like valid or like under other genders?

A: Oh, yeah, you're right. In the support group, there was kind of a back and forth dialogue between someone who had that viewpoint and like a non-binary person, right?

D: Yeah.

A: But doing so in a safe place where they can have those sorts of conversations and it's not just like a random DM that you get on Instagram from a bully, right?

D: Yeah.

A: But yeah, that's interesting that even in those support groups where you know that the other people in the group are kind of navigating those sorts of things, it was a good point, right? Like there's like blatant transphobia, but there's also like still, you know, the...

D: Self-hatred?

A: Yeah.

D: Because they don't fully, I don't want to say fully accept themselves, but they think there's like set boundaries for how you're going to transition.

A: Right.

D: Yeah, I remember like a couple of months ago on TikTok, somebody was talking about it, a trans woman, and she was talking about how non-binary people aren't real and how it's just a new fad and like, wow, gee, it's so prevalent within the community once you like take a deeper look at it. And it's crazy because you would think that everybody would be so accepting, but sometimes it's not any better than a homophobe harassing you or a transphobe.

A: Right. Actually, I feel like it hurts more when it comes from someone within your own community, right?

D: Yeah, like you're definitely supposed to be an ally. You went through so many same things I did.

A: Man, that sucks. It really sucks that someone with influences, you know...

D: And on TikTok too.

A: Yeah. I guess we should end on a happy note. You know, we discussed some pretty hefty topics, right? And just scratched the surface of them. Kacen Calendar goes into way more depth than exploring those topics throughout the book. And so it was heavy at times, but also there's a lot of Black trans joy in it. There is a happy ending. So I just think, I think you have to be in the right mindset sometimes to pick it up again and read another chapter, right? But it's definitely worth the read.

D: That wraps up our discussion of *Felix Ever After* by Kacen Calendar. Join us next episode as we cover *The Remarkable Retirement of Edna Fisher* by E.M. Anderson.



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