

The Remarkable Retirement of Edna Fisher Transcript

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Annika: I'm Annika, any pronouns are okay for me.

Jamie: I'm Jamie, I go by she/her pronouns. Today we will be discussing *The Remarkable Retirement of Edna Fisher* by E.M. Anderson.

A: E.M. Anderson, she/they, is a queer neurodivergent writer whose work has appeared in S.J. Whitby's *Awakenings*, *Acute Mutants* Anthology, Wildblood Press's *From the Depths*, a fantasy anthology, and *Dark Horses*, the magazine of weird fiction with more forthcoming from Gutslut Press. (laughter) Oh man, I should have noticed that before I started. Anyway, they have two master's degrees and a feral passion for trees, birds, and Uncle Iroh.

J: When you're a geriatric armed with nothing but gumption and knitting needles, stopping a sorcerer from wiping out an entire dragon-fighting organization is a tall order. No one understands why 83-year-old Edna Fisher is the Chosen One, destined to save the Knights from a dragon-riding sorcerer bent on their destruction. After all, Edna has never handled a magical weapon, faced down a dragon, or cast a spell. And everyone knows the Council of Wizards always chooses a teenager—like the vengeful girl ready to snatch Edna's destiny from under her nose. Still, Edna leaps at the chance to leave the nursing home. With her son long dead in the Knight's service, she's determined to save the dragon-fighters like him and to ensure other mothers don't suffer the same loss she did. But as Edna learns about the abuse in the ranks and the sorcerer's history as a Knight, she questions if it's really the sorcerer that needs stopping—or the knight she's trying to save. Other prominent characters in the story are Benjamin, who's an employee at the nursing home and is the person that Edna is closest to, kind of like an adopted son almost. There's Clementine, who's a teenager, the aforementioned one trying to snatch Edna's destiny from under her nose. She's focused on avenging the death of her sister and is obvious Chosen One material. And then we also have Kiernan, who's an Ethiopian elf traveling with Edna's group and who happens to be a secret agent for Redway. And Redway is a sorcerer with a fondness for dragons and a hatred for the Knights.

A: Content warnings: loss, grief, unresolved trauma, PTSD, panic attacks, nightmares, physical violence, fire, injury, blood, and death. Proceed with caution.

J: So I had made the mistake of not reading the content warnings that the author very kindly includes in the front of the book before I read it. So for the first three quarters of the book, I was really thinking, oh, this is like an all ages kind of fantasy. It was very much reminding me of the first couple volumes of Harry Potter. And then the last quarter comes and smacks you and you're like, it just suddenly seems so violent.

A: The funny thing is I read the description in the beginning where she specifically says: even though it sounds like a humorous type of thing, it's not going to be that. And I still was a little surprised just because the first half was so everybody loves each other. And then, oh my goodness, everybody's dying. Well, not everyone, but yes.

J: Yeah. I think it does a really good job of lulling you into a false sense of security. And like you feel, like you said, kind of like it's just about this found family, people caring for each other. And then it's once they've developed that found family, that things kind of go sideways.

A: Yeah. And in a way, I mean, it feels kind of realistic in that way. If this were a real adventure, that's how you would feel, right? And you start out and you're like, okay, well, this is, I guess this has just got to be what I'm doing. And then as you go along, you're like, wait a second, what did I sign up for?

J: Which is, yeah, exactly how this goes, because it's an 83-year-old who's living in a nursing home. She has her routine down. She has her nemesis on the staff and she has Benjamin who's in her corner and gives her someone to talk to.

A: Poor Edna's just living her life, even though she's not horribly excited about the way things are going. And poof out of nowhere, a wizard comes in and says, hey, you're the chosen one because bad things are happening and we need one. And he does literally poof out of nowhere. But then the people get mad at him and say, you can't just poof into a nursing home, which I thought was super, super funny. So they send him away because that's everybody's first reaction.

J: I actually thought that was fairly realistic because if that happens, people are just going to be like, no, you can't be here. Did you sign in?

A: Exactly. Security, man. (laughter) So yes, he comes in and he's like, well, you can find the Sword of Destiny, which is also, you know, like in the usual hero's journey, there's a mentor that tells you a certain thing that you have to get. But he's not much of a mentor, just sends her off and says, go get the Sword of Destiny and never even tells her why or how to use it. Poor lady is just left to try to figure out everything on her own. And realistically, it takes a while. I truly don't know if she ever really figures it out to tell you.

J: They're not going to give her any assistance, but they're telling her what the talisman that she needs to get is and a general idea of where it's located, which is halfway across the country.

A: Yes. I found it kind of funny that I don't think it specifically says where it starts, but it sure feels like Pennsylvania.

J: I think it mentioned something about Pittsburgh being one of the western part of Pennsylvania is where my understanding is.

A: I gotcha. I wasn't sure if it was that or if it was Ohio.

J: She eventually does get to the city and she finds the person. There's like seven people in the city though with the same name and she has to like identify all of them. And it turns out to be that the sorcerer who told her that she's the chosen one had given this sword to his old boyfriend, took off. He left to go to the grocery store and never returned home. And so he obviously had some unresolved feelings about that. And then he had put this sword that was just a random leftover from an ex-lover into this jumble sale. She has to drag down the jumble sale. And that's when she comes across Clementine and Benjamin's already with her. And so it's just, it's kind of realistic too, because it's not as though even though this is a chosen item, unless it's guarded in the Knight's school or whatever. I just, I really liked that. Cause that was a realistic thing. Cause people are going to get rid of like love tokens or stuff from old relationships. You can't expect them to hold on to it forever.

A: It was just funny that she just happened to show up on the day that he was selling it. Because man, things would have gone so different if she would have showed up the next day.

J: They meet Clementine while they're acquiring the Sword of Destiny. And then there's this whole thing of Clementine is trying to take the sword and run out on them. And the carpet she takes isn't like fully powered.

A: She was just kind of your disaster teen kind of character. If there's something that you would think, probably don't do that. She was like, I think I'm going to do that. And I'm going to do it really angrily.

J: Because again, like E.M. Anderson is playing with tropes. And so it's like teenagers put in this kind of situation. He was also dealing with PTSD and grief and loss of a sister is just trying to accomplish her goal.

A: And ironically, choosing the exact thing that she's not to like make that plausible. Like she wants to be the chosen one so badly that she just decides that that's what she is, even though she's not, which of course causes problems.

J: Yeah, because she is kind of fighting with Edna through a large part of the story where she thinks, okay, maybe it's a mistake that Edna was made the chosen one, it really should be her. And so she keeps trying to get the sword from Edna keeps trying to direct their quest. As we were talking about one of the fantasy tropes, the idea of a chosen one, the whole impetus of this book was a Twitter post, author Carrie DeRisio. The Twitter post is, "It's amazing how many prophecies involve teens. You'd think they'd pick more emotionally stable people, with more free time. Like grandmas."

A: Yes. And she sure did do that. She got the emotionally set grandmother character. Although what was really kind of nice beyond that was that you kind of expected her to be throughout the book, kind of like the in charge Sophia Petrillo kind of character, but it's far more realistic how she does it, which is that the character does get scared when people would be scared. And it is nice to have a realistic depiction of a human being instead of a stereotype.

J: Yeah, I think the author did a really great job with depictions and making Edna very relatable, as far as the emotions people would have in those kind of circumstances. But they also made it so she had also the benefits of being like a grandmother kind of figure, both to Benjamin and also to Clementine, where they turned to her, she was able to give them reassurance. And I think she was very much the glue for that found family.

A: Certainly, especially since she just adopts everyone who comes along. It's just like, oh, Kiernan's with us now. You start off with Benjamin, and then you pick up a Clementine, and then you pick up a Kiernan. And it's just like, everyone's welcome here.

J: And not that this is like a big spoiler, but then you also end the book that way, where you have this very happy, set, found family all living together in a big house. So as Edna is picking up these different characters, she's building up the cast for the book. And it's incredibly diverse as far as like ethnicities, ages, representations. It's very, very nicely done. So you have Edna, obviously, who's 83 years old, you have Benjamin, who they kind of mentioned being in his late 20s. And you have Clementine, who I think is like 15 or 16. And then you also have Amir, who they pick up who's a world-renowned carpet enchanter. And you have Kiernan, who joins them originally under false pretenses, because he's trying to get close to Clementine, because that's who the outside world believes is a chosen one for their group, because she's the obvious choice.

A: Because stereotypes.

J: So even the supporting characters that get brought in, there's a really gorgeous range of representation.

A: Absolutely, which in traditional fantasy, you don't really get a whole lot of like in traditional medieval kind of fantasy, you've got the teen characters that will then grow up and maybe one older character to be the mentor. But the fact that the ages are so spread out is very unique in fantasy literature. And it shows that there are possibilities there that haven't been plumbed very deeply yet. Also, the idea of race, all of the characters, I think Edna's the only one who is traditional white.

Benjamin is described as being dark skinned. I'm not sure if they really specifically came out with what he was. Either way, he's dark skinned. Where Clementine's relatives Mexican?

J: They were Spanish speaking. I don't know. I don't know if we got more specific than that. But she talks about her abuelita and her older sister who she was trying to avenge was Marisol. And you also then have Kiernan, who's an Ethiopian elf, which is something that would make sense in fantasy, because you're going to have elves from various cultures, not just...

A: Let me let me just say how much I love the fact that the elf that was in this book is from Africa and is black. I just love that. The fact that that's so rare is really sad. But I super love that she just went for it. And it's beautiful.

J: And besides ages, race, there's also the wide depiction of queer characters. I don't know if we really meet or have a completely straight character in the entire cast.

A: Yeah, I know. Maybe Amir. I don't know.

J: That's true. Maybe. Edna describes herself in a way that you would nowadays be able to recognize as maybe demisexual or even asexual. Benjamin is gay. Kiernan is at least bi because he's attracted to Benjamin. And then you have Clementine, who shows interest in a female character. So it really is just, I would say, a very large queer cast.

A: Yes. Clementine also says she is ace.

J: Oh, okay.

A: Yeah. I delight in a cast of entirely queer characters. Yet again, something that's not usually seen in fantasy fiction, but definitely belongs there.

J: And then along with all of that diversity, we also have representations of neurodiversity.

A: Yeah, there is a lot of different mental issues in this. Benjamin in particular has anxiety disorder, which I find very beautiful to have in a book because the way he's depicted, he's scared, but he does it anyway. And that's something that you don't really think about is that even if you have anxiety disorder, you can still do the things that scare you and it doesn't actually hold you back. And Clementine in particular has PTSD. I mean, it's not really a spoiler, but she found her sister dead with a guy standing over her. So that would definitely give you some PTSD. Kiernan has PTSD as well from his experiences, as does even Redway. Although the way you handle your mental issues is definitely a spread in this book. Some of them use it for good and some of them just decide that's just how it is.

J: Another thing that's really nice about this as far as neurodiversity, Benjamin has a lot of anxiety too. And they mentioned he has some form of autism. Whenever he's interested in the subject, he'll pepper people with questions nonstop. When he's done this in the past with other people, they would judge him harshly for it. And so when he realizes that he's asking a bunch of questions about a topic he cares about with his found family, those memories are automatically coming up for him. And he's like trying to rein himself in and apologize. But all this found family, they don't get annoyed by it. They welcome it. They recognize that as part of Benjamin. So it's just, it's really, it's sweet in how accepting they are of each other.

A: Yes. I don't know why I didn't think of that one because I super relate to that myself. So, I mean, everything about this is like so different from traditional fantasy and it's so delightful. But another thing that I found really cool about it was that it was an alternate world, but it was like our current world. So they mentioned Pittsburgh and actual places in the U.S. and California and the land of the dragons, whatever that was called. It was on the borders of the Amazon River. Dominion. It's nice to

be able to imagine things happening in your own world that are fantastical too. You don't have to just take it outside of your world, just putting it more within reach. If you put it in the contemporary world, it makes it easier to bond with, I guess. I feel like I'm not making much sense.

J: No, no, I totally, it's like a version of our world where they also have Pegasus, they have flying carpets, they have dragons that are all over. They obviously have elves and other types of fae creatures. So it's familiar in that the pantries are more or less the same, but it has elements of the fantastical woven through it.

J: Yes, that's true. And that's the mantra that I try to fit into my own books, familiar but different.

J: So as Annika keeps saying, this is just a very different take on fantasy. It's actually E.M. Anderson's debut novel. They're already working on more though. And there are themes they say you can expect from their stories, which are older main characters, elements of found family, grump versus sunshine, I'm fine (but they were not fine), characters who quite literally flee their feelings, magic and out of control emotions, loss and grief, and queer folks.

A: Which clearly they did super with this time as well. But yeah, the dynamics between each of the characters too is just so interesting because Clementine and Benjamin, Benjamin is like the level-headed one. And he's like, you're making terrible choices and they clash all the time. Whereas poor Edna ends up having to be like, I love everyone, let's all get along.

J: They all really do become very fond of each other deep down. Like Benjamin and Clementine kind of have like a sibling dynamic going on before too long. Yeah, it's incredibly sweet, but funny. There's a good mixture. There's humor. And then at the end, there's also just grief and loss.

A: And flames.

J: Yes. Although you don't see the dragons as necessarily like the villains at this point.

A: Yeah. The dragons like, it's a little sad that they don't have personality or anything. They are just creatures in this novel, but oh well, can't have everything.

J: The one touch I remember that was really cute is one of the characters had made a comment like, I thought dragons hoarded gold or jewels and one dragon hoarded flowers and lush foliage. And I think it was Kiernan who said "they're dragons. They hoard whatever they want."

Yes. Important podcast question. If you were a dragon, what would you hoard?

J: I feel like almost anybody who works at a library is going to say books.

A: That's true. Mine's bunnies, bet you're shocked by that.

(laughter)

J: I'm not shocked.

A: Although I also have a lot of tea mugs, so I guess that would be the tea mug dragon.

J: That sounds very charming.

A: So the traditional space for fantasy always was white male authors, white male characters, main characters. Just the fact that this was written by someone who uses she/they pronouns is huge. And the diversity within it is such a huge step forward in fantasy fiction. And I hope that we continue to grow in that direction and continue to pull in people who used to be marginalized by this kind of story and allow everyone to enjoy fantasy instead of just a select few. Even when I was beginning my journey as a writer back in 2013, women still had to use their initials. I mean, E.M. Anderson totally chose

that on their own, but you had to use your to be published as a woman in fantasy, because otherwise people wouldn't take you seriously.

J: No, just, like you mentioned, so few female science fiction writers that were able to use their names, like Connie Willis, Martha Wells, like just some of the big names were able to go ahead and get published with their full name as opposed to reducing themselves to their first or middle initial.

A: Yeah, because I mean, like some of the other authors you can think of, even J.K. Rowling had to do that. And like C.J. Cherry. I'm glad that even though this author chose to do this, that it's not something that's required anymore to get people to look at your book and take it seriously.

J: And a little aside, the publisher for this book is Hansen House, and they actually specialize in diverse titles, diverse authors. So something to be aware of.

A: On a personal note, thanks. I didn't know that.

J: Well, I looked it up immediately, because I, of course, was impressed with the book, and then I was like, I never heard of this publisher before. And then that's how I got to find out about it.

A: That's funny, because that's usually what I do. Like, I usually, if I see a book that's like got queer stuff going on, and I'm like, ooh, who published that? I don't know why I didn't even look.

J: Yeah, so we can look for more from E.M. Anderson published with Hansen House in the future. So good books in store.

A: Yay. That wraps up our discussion of *The Remarkable Retirement of Edna Fisher* by E.M. Anderson. And we'll see you next time when we discuss *The Luis Ortega Survival Club* by Sonora Reyes.



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