

## *Camp Damascus* 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.



Ann: Hi, my name is Ann. My pronouns are she/her, they/them.

Amber: Hi, my name is Amber. My pronouns are she/her. The book we are talking about today is *Camp Damascus* by Chuck Tingle. Chuck Tingle is an anonymous author of romance, horror, and fantasy, best known for gay erotica with funny titles. While he has done some interviews, he wears a pink sack over his head that says “love is real,” so no one has actually ever seen his face, and most information about him online is probably not true. His author bios are a trip though, so I do highly recommend looking those up.

Ann: So a little bit about *Camp Damascus*: (synopsis) A searing and earnest horror debut about the demons the queer community faces in America, the price of keeping secrets, and finding the courage to burn it all down. They'll scare you straight to hell. Welcome to Neverton, Montana: home to a God-fearing community with a heart of gold. Nestled high up in the mountains is Camp Damascus, the self-proclaimed “most effective” gay conversion camp in the country. Here, a life free from sin awaits, but the secret behind that success is anything but holy. The story follows Rose, a girl who loves Jesus and her family, and knows for certain what is right and wrong. She's curious though, something her various authority figures all warn her against, so when she starts seeing, feeling, and remembering things she doesn't understand, she knows she has to ask questions and find out what's going on no matter the cost.

Amber: Some content warnings for this book, because it is a horror book, there's a lot going on in it, to just be aware of going in. There is emotional and physical abuse, misogyny, blood, gaslighting, violence, vomit, body horror, torture, mental illness, death, gore, gun violence, religious bigotry, forced institutionalization, homophobia, medical content, and murder. It's quite a list, so just be wary of that if any of those are triggering for you. Alright, so what were your initial thoughts about this book?

Ann: I was honestly surprised. It was very well written, and I'm not really a horror person, but when I first read it, I was like, no, this is what horror should be. Like, this is good stuff, because it isn't just, you know, the traditional evil beings, but it's like the true evil in the heart of people, right? And I was all about it. I think I read it in one day.

Amber: I did not read it in one day. I did read it a lot faster than I anticipated. And yeah, it wasn't what I expected content-wise either. Like, I like horror, and I think it was more than just, like, a horror book. I think I always thought I, like, knew what to anticipate coming into a book about, like, a gay conversion camp, and I kind of expected it to take place in that setting, but I enjoyed that it wasn't about that, and it was actually, like, more of a mystery of figuring out, like, why Rose was remembering things, of, like, trying to recover her memory and figure out what's going on. And I think it was also just a lot about, like, religious trauma, which, again, in the book description, it should not be that surprising, but it was very—I don't know that relatable is a good word for this book, because hopefully it is not literally relatable to too many people, but yeah, I was surprised, and I really enjoyed what it was. So, Rose, what did we think of our protagonist?

Ann: I really liked her, and I really empathized with her. I was a bit surprised. A lot of times when you have these young adult protagonists, they kind of annoy me, but I think because of all the horror elements going on, you, I felt more like, no, I can understand why you might just want to pretend that it didn't happen. So, I just, I really liked her character. What, what, what were your impressions?

Amber: I have a lot of thoughts. First, one of the things that I read when I was, like, preparing for this episode is I looked up our interviews with Chuck Tingle, and one of the things that he had mentioned was that he used Peter Pan as a recurring motif in the book, and the reason he did that is because of the way that evangelical Christianity often, like, infantilizes their young adults. So, Rose is actually 20, even though she's still a senior in high school, because there's, like, a two-year gap that people in her religious community have to take. So, even though she's 20, her parents treat her a lot younger, and as a result, she sort of acts a lot younger than you would anticipate a 20-year-old acting. I was also really interested in her— she's very clearly autistic. At first, it was just a, oh, this seems like some neurodivergent traits, and then she actually, like, is self-aware of the fact that she knows she is doing these things because of the way her brain works. And I thought that was really cool, that we got a protagonist who is not just queer and not just coming out of this sort of evangelical community, but also a neurodivergent character who leans into that, and it's not an issue, it's just a part of her character. So, I guess before we keep going, I think maybe, like, a little bit more context for what actually happens in the story might be useful. So, the book starts out with Rose and some of her senior friends jumping off of a cliff as, like, a senior activity thing. And right off the bat, Rose is having thoughts that just seem sort of, like, passive about one of her friends who happens to be a girl. And she, within the first few pages, like, sees a strange figure watching her, and she's like, “oh, that's weird,” and then later she goes home and is thinking about her day, and she, like, throws up a bunch of bugs, which is disgusting. But the conversation that they're having when that happens has to do with her friend, who is a guy who her parents are sort of pushing her towards. The mental gymnastics of evangelical purity culture—It's not explicitly talked about here, but, like, you really feel it in this moment because Rose is like, “you've never wanted me to date. Why are you so insistent about this boy all of a sudden? Because this has never been a thing we've talked about.” So that's what's going on really early in the book. Rose is going to a therapist who is from the church, who we later find out does not even have in his notes that Rose is autistic, just some other things, and so the whole book is her trying to figure out what exactly is going on, her slowly, like, losing trust in the authority figures that she surrounds herself with, or that are around her. Because they keep telling her to blindly agree with the things that they're telling her and ignore the very real experiences that she's having. Anyway, on to Kingdom of the Pines. So Kingdom of the Pines is the church that Rose is part of, and it's, like, a megachurch, and it's also, like, a little culty. By which I mean they have, like, a prophet, almost. I do not remember his name, but he's the one who founded their church, and they have four tenets of the church that everything revolves around, which are: respect, “I will honor when I do not understand;” integrity, “I will believe when I do not witness;” service, “I will strive when my sin is heavy;” and excellence, “I will persevere when my body does not.” So those are the main tenets outside of, like, a typical evangelical denomination that this particular one follows. Which, if you will notice, are a perfect formula for never having opposition, because if somebody questions what you are telling them, they are immediately not following these tenets. So that's the Kingdom of the Pines, and in the environment that they're in, they are pretty remote from a lot of other towns, and it seems as though this religious community is the bulk of the people who live in Neverton, Montana. They also, as we mentioned in the book description, they boast a gay conversion camp with 100% success rate, and a lot of their community is involved in that. So it's a big part of their environment. So when these things start happening to Rose, she starts asking the people who she thinks she can trust to help her work through them. She asks, “why do you think this happened to me?” She even has questions about the bugs that she threw up, and her dad's like, “don't worry about that. Stop asking questions.” And I'm like, “my God, she just threw up insects.” And you're just like, “that's fine. That's a normal thing to happen. You probably just swallowed some bugs when you were in the lake earlier.”

Ann: Yeah, it's horrible. It's like it's a horrible situation. I just kept getting taken aback, though, by the fact that, the horrible things that are happening with the... paten? The one lady [inaudible], and the bugs and all of that. It's such a metaphor for what gay conversion therapy really does to people. It's trying to associate every time you think about something good and loving, you're going to hate yourself or there's going to be a demon. There's going to be a demon that's going to come after you, or you're going to be unclean and have bugs out of your mouth. It got under my skin in this way. I think it's probably part of the point of narrative to say, if you went through this, it might have driven you a

little bit crazy too. You might be like, “oh my gosh, no, I'm completely normal. I love being opposite gender people and I'm definitely this gender. I never want to think about this ever again because it would be so horrible.”

Amber: Because you're being scared into it. You're not coming to it organically. You're just doing it because you're afraid that something bad will happen to you.

Ann: And then it erases part of who she is. She has to try to be some other person, but she can't.

Amber: Yeah. I don't think this is a spoiler because it happens within the first two chapters of the book, but we've already hinted: Rose is a lesbian. She has a little bit of a crush on one of her female friends. And, I don't know how much is a spoiler, because the whole thing is you're trying to figure out what exactly is going on and why she's seeing this person who, Pachid, like you said, and what exactly is happening. I guess it would not be a spoiler to say that whenever she has gay thoughts, she's punished for them in some way or another. And she doesn't know why this is happening. And she doesn't remember why it would be happening to her because she doesn't even remember that she's gay. But early on in the book, she has these thoughts about her friend and the friend literally dies. This is very early in the book, so I apologize if that's a spoiler, but this is very early in the book. But because she has these thoughts, it is more important to the system that she is in that the thoughts go away. And if that means literally killing someone, that is the preferred option to her having gay thoughts, which in itself is quite honestly the worst part of all of this because the people in charge of it believe that the ends justify the means and the means happen to be just horrendous. I was going to say very harmful, but literally a girl died because of it. Yes. This is so difficult to talk about without giving away too much. But yeah, I think one of the things that you had mentioned when we were preparing for this was you wrote: “a horror novel where the real horror is human beings who want to heal gay people into being healthy, straight people.” And the lengths to which they will go to do that is just insane. Anyway, that is the bulk of what this book is about. There are some other elements to it though.

Ann: Oh yeah. I've seen horror things like this before, but I don't know if I've ever been quite so struck by the fact that the scariest thing in the story is actually real and actually really happening. It might even be worse. I mean, part of me was like, I really wish it was some kind of evil thing, you know, like demons or whatever. But no, this is actual people actually driving other people insane because they can't accept the way they are. And it's like, wow.

Amber: Yeah.

Ann: That makes it super terrifying in a way.

Amber: One of the things that one of the characters, his name is Saul. He doesn't come in until later, but he says “that's the scariest thing about them. They're not special.” Like this sounds like horrifying and like this wild work of fiction when in fact it's based on just like real religious communities that—I don't know if they would do this. I will give them the benefit of the doubt. This is probably a step too far for most people, but come at the issue with like the same mindset of: the ends justify the means. But something that I found really interesting actually about this was that this book is very heavy on deconstructing faith, especially a faith that you've been believing blindly for a long time. But we do have a character who went through the same thing and had the same traumas and still believes in God and still going to church. And Rose, for reasons I will not disclose, Rose has to contend with the fact that there are supernatural forces at play. And she doesn't know what that means for her, but she knows she's not going to enter church again. But her friend still goes to church and he has decided that he's not going to let this particular community that is doing so much harm define who God is and what God's love looks like. Which is, I think, so interesting in a book like this where so much of it is about a religious body manipulating its followers and harming them because that's better than them not falling in line. But we have a character who still finds value in his faith despite all of that, which is so interesting to me, because I have a lot of queer friends who are no longer in the

church, and then I have some queer friends who their relationship with God and scripture has grown because they've taken the time to investigate what their queerness means in regards to their faith. So I just think it's so interesting that that is part of it. Because it'd be so easy to take this narrative and have the end-all/be-all answer be like, "church is bad," you know? Because as an institution, it is often used as an element of control. But that's not what this did. It said: this type of religious environment can be like actively harmful to people because control is their most important thing for them. But that's not necessarily mean that God and faith aren't real, but that you can determine what that means for you once you've like had the chance to reflect from that. And that kind of goes with one of the other things we wanted to talk about was family versus found family.

Ann: Yeah, I think that part is where for me, like, I've read some of technical stuff. I'm not erotica, especially like furry erotica, not really my thing. But, you know, whatever. But I've been impressed by some of his, first of all, his humanity, like how good he is, like humane as people are actually like. And then also, sometimes he thinks really, really deep thoughts. And I feel like when he got into the whole religious faith thing, I think I did look up in an interview. So I was just wondering, and he is agnostic personally, but he has had, you know, friends who are religious and he's like, it was important to me that I didn't completely discount that in this work. I think that whole thing was part of what makes, you know, found family so great is the fact that you can still disagree. You can be like, I don't think I can ever, ever, ever, and I don't understand how you can. However, I still love you and you are part of my new, my new family that actually cares about me. And I think part of that too is sort of like going against this sort of dogmatic—whatever you call it—controlling religious faith, where it's like, you're either all in, either you agree with everything I agree with, or we, we can't love each other anymore. And I feel like that's part of the power of that distinction. And, and for me, this is something that I've experienced in religion too. Like I consider myself pretty religious, but not like an organized religion kind of way. And it really bothers me when people in organized religion—because I'm kind of like, this is not what Jesus would have said, you know—when people in organized religion try to say things like, you have to respect the people you were grown up with. And, and I'm like, not necessarily, not if they were abusive jerks, you know, I can, I can sort of go, I want to be better than that. And I'm still going to love you from way over here while not staying in this codependent relationship or whatever. And I feel like that that was something very true that he tapped into that it felt authentic to me. It felt like, I like, who are you, Chuck Tingle? You know, who are you, really? But I can tell that you have friends. I mean, honestly, you have friends because you know, you're talking about that think differently from you and you co-exist with them. And, and it made me think, have respect for him as a writer and as somebody who probably takes all of the characters and the various intersectional groups they belong to seriously. And so it was definitely—I feel like that point where she was talking to Saul, and I think we can say that's a spoiler, but her, her new found friend, Saul, and where they, they really disagree, but they're like, you know what, when it comes to what matters, we are here for each other. I think in that, that whole exchange and kind of some of the points that are brought up in the conversation on both sides, I felt like Chuck Tingle, you have actually had this conversation before it happens to you. And, and wow, like, thank you for doing that because I feel like a lot of times, I know people who are, who are gay and, and belong to various religious faiths, including in some cases, you know, faiths that where it's not okay to be gay, sort of, except everyone depends, you know, who you talk to. And one of the things that I've always found, like, very interesting is just, it's just the way that when you talk about it, you talk about why, and you find out that sometimes it doesn't make your religious faith go deeper because you're like, I need to actually internalize something about why I believe what I believe. And then sometimes you're like, I can feel like in myself and you can see in someone else and they've asked me to talk to the pastor or whatever. And the pastor's been like, no, you can't do that. And they're like, well, you're not the boss of me. God is. And it's like, oh, you have been down that road. You can't, you can't make that kind of stuff up. It's like, I can see that you are, probably in Chuck Tingle's case, maybe his friends have been down that road. And he's like, oh yeah, I've been in that conversation. And, and I feel like it's important. A lot of times, just what people like this sometimes want to do is they want to create this us, them scenario. Like either you are Kingdom of the Pine or you are like Satan's minion, you know? Like there's no in-between and it's like, it's possible to be married and here— maybe not Kingdom of the Pine, but it's possible to be, you know, Kingdom of the Pine and not be Kingdom of the Pine, you know? Like,

maybe not, you can't really be part of a cult. Like maybe, but like you can be part of like an organized religion and, and still be not really, you know, accept all of the tenants, especially the evil ones. And, and I felt like that was an important part of that conversation, you know, because this goes on in families all over, all over the place. And sometimes you don't hear about that because people don't want to talk about that, but sometimes you get these mixed families, mixed relationships. And I think that they're more beautiful. Yeah. It's more beautiful for, for having that difference than it would be— And, and not to say that it isn't also, it can't also be beautiful if you all belong to the same faith, but I think there's a— I don't know for me personally, I think it's beautiful when you can have people who really disagree and they, and they get along where sometimes if you both, there's nothing really like that. You might still have your disagreements and you're still two people, but I don't know. Anyway. Oh, now I'm rambling. I'm going to stop.

Amber: No, that makes sense. And I think it's really interesting in this book, though, the way that Saul and Rose interact, versus the way that Rose and her parents interact because her parents, when you meet them, they're, you know, a very, like, they seem very wholesome. They seem very like loving and supportive and warm, but whenever anything abnormal happens, when the bugs happen, when Rose is curious, you kind of see that crack. You see that, that warmth and that support don't exist all the time. They only exist when Rose is doing what they want her to do. Like, one of the lines that I wrote down, well, when Rose is like figuring out what's going on, she said that “the love I was promised is conditional.” Like her parents and her have this great relationship as long as she does exactly what they want her to do. She feels supported and safe, but then when she mentions that her bedroom door isn't there and she could have sworn she had a bedroom door, her dad's like, “no, that's never been there. You're wrong.” And he just gaslights her that she is, she's mistaken. He has never done anything. Like he makes it as though she's being unreasonable when she's asking like a perfectly normal question. And a couple of times you see him like get genuinely angry and then like cool down a little bit and be like, “oh no, no, no, everything's fine. And you're fine. But just like, you know, it, it upsets me when you act this way,” you know? Whereas, like, her friend and later the person that she's in love with, like they don't always agree on things and Rose still has her tics and all this stuff, but they support and love each other regardless. It's just very interesting because the love that her parents had for her seemed so warm and, and good. And then like Rose said, it was conditional as long as she remained the daughter that they wanted her to be.

Ann: That is also so powerful. I mean, unfortunately that's the experience that so many LGBT people have, you know, as, as kids, they were their parents. And I think about that sometimes, you know, like, well, my parents were not the best, and certainly were not very accepting of me, but I mean, I never got kicked out of my house or disowned or, you know, you know, maybe tried to be in, you know, you, you know, I, I never had to deal with that, you know, and you think about what it must be like to still love your parents, the people who raised you, but they're also people who are torturing you for being you at the same time. Like, how do you negotiate that? You know, and I feel like the book did a really good job of showing in real time, how you might negotiate with finding out that your parents are— you have to get away from them. They're going to destroy you. Wait, how, wait, but how does that make you feel? You know? Like—

Amber: Yeah, it's a very, very good book. It's very juicy, lots of good stuff to like get into.

Ann: Yeah. And a very fast paced. It's like—

Amber: It is.

Ann: Yeah.

Amber: I mean, it's not a very long book to begin with and it's just such an engaging, it's engagingly written and it's very fast paced. So yeah. And it's, it's written in, what was it? Present tense, which for me at least, it takes a minute to always get it to, but once I'm in it, it's like very immersive. Yeah. Overall, very engaging book. It's so much— so many content warnings. Some of it's really gross. So

like, if you're squeamish, this is not the one for you. Like I said, there are bugs that she throws up several times, which is gross. That's just gross. That's probably my least favorite horror trope. And you know, it's only, I've only read two books with it. And each time I'm like, that's the grossest thing I've ever read in my life. Yeah. Throwing up bugs is disgusting. Ugh, especially when you find out why she has bugs in— Yeah. No, thank you.

Ann: Oh, yeah.

Amber: I will say the ending is very satisfying. It is also gross. We have, we have some more gross descriptive elements, but very satisfying.

Ann: Yeah the very ending, ending, is very satisfying.

Amber: It is, right?

Ann: It actually is, yeah.

Amber: The gross, the gross stuff at the end happens to people you want it to happen to, but it's still pretty gross. I—

Ann: That's true

Amber: —blagh, hmm.

Ann: Yeah. I mean, anyway...

Amber: Did he deserve it? Absolutely he did. The bad therapists and camp counselors for sure deserved it, but it was still gross to read.

Ann: Yeah. Yeah. But then it could've happened to a better... better group of—

Amber: Right? Like I'm glad, you know? Sometimes books are like, yeah, sometimes books are like, we're the better person, and so therefore we will not treat these people the way that they have treated us. And this book— well, to be fair, the people enacting the torture, that's sort of their whole job. But in this one, they're like, no, these people suck, and they're going to suffer. In real life, maybe—

Ann: I'm okay with that!

Amber: Yeah like, I'm good with it. It was very... I feel like these were extreme circumstances, so... yeah.



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