

## *A Merry Little Meet Cute* 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.



Ashley: Hi, my name is Ashley and my pronouns are she or they.

Jamie: My name is Jamie and I go by she/her.

A: Today we're talking about *A Merry Little Meet Cute* by Julie Murphy and Sierra Simone. Julie Murphy lives in North Texas with her husband who loves her, her dog who adores her, and her cats who tolerate her. After several wonderful years in the library world, Julie now writes full time. When she's not writing or reliving her reference desk glory days, she can be found watching made-for-TV movies, hunting for the perfect slice of cheese pizza, and planning her next great travel adventure. She is also the author of young adult novels, *Dumplin'*, now a film on Netflix, *Puddin'*, *Ramona Blue*, and *Side Effects May Vary*. Sierra Simone is a USA Today and Wall Street Journal bestselling former librarian. Her notable works include *Priest*, *American Queen*, and *Misadventures of a Curvy Girl*. Her books have been featured in Marie Claire, Cosmopolitan, Entertainment Weekly, and BuzzFeed. She lives with her spouse and family in Kansas City.

J: Bee Hobbes (aka Bianca Von Honey) has a successful career as a plus-size adult film star. With a huge following and two supportive moms, Bee couldn't ask for more. But when Bee's favorite producer casts her to star in a Christmas movie he's making for the squeaky-clean Hope Channel, Bee's career is about to take a more family-friendly direction. Forced to keep her work as Bianca under wraps, Bee quickly learns this is a task a lot easier said than done. Though it all becomes worthwhile when she discovers her co-star is none other than childhood crush Nolan Shaw, an ex-boy band member in desperate need of career rehab. Nolan's promised his bulldog manager to keep it zipped up on set, and he will if it means he'll be able to provide a more stable living situation for his sister and mom. But things heat up quickly in Christmas Notch, Vermont, when Nolan recognizes his new co-star from her ClosedDoors account (oh yeah, he's a member). Now Bee and Nolan are sneaking off for quickies on set, keeping their new relationship a secret from the Hope Channel's execs. Things only get trickier when the reporter who torpedoed Nolan's singing career comes snooping around—and takes an instant interest in mysterious newcomer Bee. And if Bee and Nolan can't keep their off-camera romance behind the scenes, then this merry little meet cute might end up on the cutting room floor.

A: Oh man, this book. Jamie, I started to listen to this book in audio format while on the clock. I was like, oh no, I can't do that. And quickly switched to the hard copy.

J: Yeah, talk about lube in the library workplace. A little bit difficult.

A: I can just imagine like a co-worker coming in like, what are you listening to?

J: Talking about lube though, that actually has been one of the most successful formulas in making bubbles for youth services. Just FYI.

A: Really?

J: Yes.

A: I did not know that. [laughter] Oh, that's pretty great. So I feel like it should be mentioned right off the top that this is a very steamy rom-com. I was reading, I think it was an "Ask Me Anything" on

Reddit that Julie and Sierra did where they introduced it as a raunch-com instead of a rom-com, which I thought was perfect. I thought that was great. So it is very steamy, but it's also about a Hope Channel movie because they can't use the famous greeting card television name, right? But it does have some depth to it. So it is a very good read. It's definitely the most intense romance book that I've read this year.

J: It was very charming, very fun to read. It was fluffy while still having, like you said, some substance to it. It did go deep into some issues. I really like how they actually addressed one of the things I thought of first. Later on in the book, a character mentions to Teddy, the producer, and Bee, that “the two of you were the only ones who thought this had a chance of going without a hitch.” Because it seems so incredibly unlikely that in this world that we live in with facial recognition software, even if you had completely separate groups of people who watch the Hope Channel and who watch porn, there would still be almost no way that they would be able to get away with having a famous adult film star not be recognized in some way, shape, or form. So, I really like they addressed that, and it was very sweetly handled. Teddy, the producer, didn't just bring Bee on from his world. He also brought in a lot of the crew. So, there's lighting technicians, there's wardrobe, there's makeup, and all these people know Bee, which is really nice because it gives her a supportive network while she's working on this Hope Channel movie. But the crew is definitely giving away that it's not their usual movie genre.

A: Yeah, right. Because Teddy is trying to break out of the adult film industry. Though he's still invested in that, he wanted to try something different to get his name out there, right? And so they had different crew and a different main actress lined up for it, but suddenly, you know, an incident happened and those people weren't able to participate in the movie, and so he had to work really quickly. And I don't think he even meant to have Bee substitute in for the main actress, right? He kind of gets his folders mixed up when he's talking with the director and she sees her topless photos, like “that's who I want”. And yeah, it's just silly that like all these things happen like the nude headshot and not even a headshot, I guess just like a nude photo of Bee. And like all the little comments that the support staff make and Nolan, like when he hears them, he's just like, okay, what a weird thing to say, but, sure. The other people on set don't really pick it up, which is, yeah, makes for like very hilarious scenes, but yeah, a little unlikely in the real world, I think.

J: Yes. Like one of the first instances that the cast of this film is going to have a very different experience is when the wardrobe person, his name's Luca, I forget what the actual like title is though. He presents the male main character with a series of crotchless pants as like possible wardrobe options because he thinks the movie is called “Duke the Balls” instead of “Duke the Halls.”

A: And so while it is kind of an unlikely plotline, right, especially in this day and age, it does make for a fun storyline and helps to keep things lighthearted without making like the adult film industry the butt of the joke, right? Like you don't get the sense that it's not a worthwhile genre or a talent or anything like that. It's just, you know, hey, wouldn't it be funny if people from this world were put into like a goody-two-shoes kind of Hallmark movies setting, you know, but I thought it was well done and it had me tackling quite a bit for those scenes.

J: Yeah. The reason it's so successful is that it doesn't poke fun at anybody really, except possibly the people who take wholesomeness like incredibly seriously for like the Hope Channel. Like, yeah, the adult film industry is treated with respect. Like they are just doing a job. They are meeting a need.

A: The comment of when they're adjusting the lighting and like “no shadow on the boobs. Got it. Like, I know how to do that.” They're like, “okay. I mean, that's not what, how I would say that,” but very comical. Another thing that I thought that was done well in the book, you know, we have the comparison of these two industries and how they're different and similar. But also I think it's worth noting that Bee Hobbs, the main female lead is a pluz-size, quote unquote, porn star. So it talks about, you know, her experience as a fat person in the world, but it doesn't do that in a way that's shameful in any way. It like really celebrates like her body in a joyful way. And it never like pokes fun at that.

And there's never any like negative self-talk from Bee or from her family or friends, you know, if there's any negative comments or like fears of what people are going to think if they find out that, you know, she's a porn star in this Hope Channel movie, like it's immediately rebutted, you know, like, well, that people might say that, but it's not right. You know, so like, I think that's one of Julie's strong points in her previous books. I've read quite a few of her Young Adult books and all of them have, you know, plus-size main characters in them as well. And so it was nice to see that in her new adult fiction as well. I feel like it's really hard to come by a book that one has a fat main character and two doesn't have even just like a little mention of negative self-talk, you know?

J: That is so incredibly rare. I was just thinking Bee's really healthy body image for herself was probably the first one I've seen because, it's becoming more common to find fat female main characters, but I can't think of one besides this where they didn't at least indulge in some negative self-talk. Like, do they find themselves as attractive? Do they feel insecure when they're looking in the mirror? Bee didn't really have any of that though. It was so refreshing.

J: Yeah, right. Like, I'm trying to think. The same. All the ones that I can think of that I've read where it's like that lack of self-confidence is the barrier that the MC overcomes in the story and it's just kind of yucky. I don't know. I don't know how to describe it, but the way that, you know, Julie and Sarah write Bee and have her family and friends interact with her was, yeah, very refreshing.

J: At the same time, they were able to do it in a realistic way too, where it does refer to like some negative perceptions from other people. Like Bee had mentioned, there are some male adult film stars who just would not want to co-star alongside her because of her size.

A: Right.

J: But like that's all that's really mentioned. It's just kind of like an aside fact of life, somebody else's preference, but that's not going to influence B's perception of herself.

A: It kind of made for an interesting juxtaposition between her and the main male character, right, which I read somewhere in an interview with the two authors that they were watching a cheesy Christmas movie together one night and just like eating pie and having a good night in. And one of them mentioned like the production value of this terrible Christmas movie is very similar to a porno. And so then they like started chatting about that and they're like, oh my God, we should write a book about this. And so that's kind of how this came to be. They like paused the movie and hopped in a hot tub, which I guess is where they do their best thinking and came up with the plot for this book. So I lost how I was going to make that connection, but I loved the juxtaposition between Bee and Nolan where Nolan is this like early 2000s, like, bad boy from a boy band, you know? So it just like made them both very, very interesting characters and seeing how they vibe because like to the outside person, it would be a very unexpected match, right?

J: Yeah, but they're both large stars in their own right. And as you can imagine, the media coverage for each of them is very different. So Nolan had gotten into a scandal when he was still a member of the boy band. And that kind of became his fall from grace where he—

A: —has this scandal surrounding him. And so the “Duke of the Halls” movie is kind of his way to get back in people's good graces. So it's showing like a wholesome version of him to help people get past this.

J: A scandal that involves the darling American figure skater and two Dutch speed skaters. And Nolan has a really interesting backstory to where his main motivation for getting back into the world of entertainment, trying to rebrand himself, is because he just wants to take care of his family, his younger sister and his mom. They've been struggling financially. They all live together. And he just recognizes that he will need to earn a much more steady income than he's able to do otherwise.

A: Yeah. And it's interesting because everyone who is in on it and is aware of his line of work, they're like, "you have to behave. You have to keep this under wraps. No one can find out." And then, you know, Nolan and his manager, well, Nolan knows, right, because he follows her content, but his manager doesn't know. But she's like, "you have to stay in line on screen and off or your career is in jeopardy." But for him, it's not about his fame and success. It's, you know, "I have to behave so that I can support my family." And that was one of the heavier things that I enjoyed them having included in the book, his relationship with his mom and sister and him trying to navigate mental health in his family. His mother is diagnosed with bipolar disorder, which requires a lot of additional care and medical expenses. But his job requires him to be on location away from home a lot. And so having him navigate that and the way that they address bipolar disorder and mental health in general in the book, I thought was very well done. I feel like that's something that could go downhill very quickly in a book as, like, a secondary plot line. But I thought it helped a lot with the character development of Nolan and making him a deeper, more in-depth character.

J: I also thought it was really interesting that they chose to, like before they met, they were each other's like top crushes. Because Bee had had this huge crush on Nolan all through her childhood. She had even waited out in the rain to meet them after a concert. And then Nolan has been a huge fan of Bianca Von Honey ever since she started. So, he's already much more familiar with her body of work than you would think he might be otherwise.

A: I feel like that similarity between them of having a crush on one another before even meeting was very important to not like over-sexualize Bee or to like idolize Nolan. It kind of put them on even—

J: More equal grounds.

A: Yeah. So I thought that was very clever. And they would, you know, poke fun at each other about it, right? "Oh, I bet you have your walls at home, like covered in posters of me," you know, things like that. That was very playful and fun.

J: So those are just the two main characters. But the secondary cast is amazing as well. They're very well fleshed out. And it just kind of goes into relationship stuff with all of them. So our two leads are very chaotic bisexuals. Nolan was actually Bee's first like bicon when he was out when a lot of other people weren't. And his confidence to be comfortable with his sexuality gave her confidence. They are certainly not the only, I think most of the couples mentioned in the book are actually LGBTQ. Like the director, Gretchen, and the screenwriter, Pearl, are girlfriends. And then Luca, the wardrobe manager that we talked about earlier, there has a crush on Angel, Teddy's son. And—

A: These moms, they were so good. I love them.

J: Mom and Mama Pam.

A: Yeah, Mom and Mama Pam! And just seeing different types of relationships, right? Like you said, Luca and Angel are figuring out what their relationship is and how that's going to work. And I think Julie and Sierra have written two more books in this series. And I believe one of them follows Angel and Luca.

J: Aww!

A: So I'm excited to read that because, yeah, you don't really get a closure on that relationship. Yeah, now that you mentioned that, I think all the couples were queer. It was nice to see the variety of different queer relationships. And, you know, even what was the strip club called?

J: There was the Dirty Snowball, but that was a bar.

A: That was the bar. Oh, man. They're all like too similarly...

J: So a huge part of this book is that the Hope Channel, which is a play, again, on a certain greeting card company's name, has taken over this small town in Vermont pretty much just for the purpose of filming their many, many holiday films there. And so everything, the street names, the shops, is designed to reference Christmas in some way. And it's decorated like Christmas all year round, which, of course, is very surreal. But all the businesses, including the strip club that's just outside of town, have holiday names.

A: But even that was like pretty LGBTQ friendly and like the interactions between the characters and the strippers at the strip club. The diversity of the queer relationships was nice. Especially, I think this is the first—and maybe this is more saying something about me rather than the book industry—but this is the first book that I read about two bisexual emcees, where one is this man and one is this woman, and they end up together. Like, I feel like a lot of books where they're about bisexual people is like, yeah, they like both, but they end up with someone of the same sex, you know, which is fine and real and valid. But I feel like there's that bit of bi-erasure, right, where it's...

J: Very much. So, yeah, I liked that this was like kind of a confirmation that you can still be very queer and you can be dating or involved with somebody of the opposite sex.

A: Yeah. But, you know, you mentioned Christmas Notch and how it's, like, its own little 365, 24/7 Christmas village. Do you want to talk about that a little bit more about the setting?

J: Yes, they actually include a map in the beginning of the book with street names, business names. And so there's the Holy Night Chapel, Frosty's Diner, Mistletoe Theater, the Dirty Snowball, as we discussed, and the streets are named Silver Bells Boulevard, Chestnut Close, Holly Grove, Tinsel Lane. So it's very much an immersive experience. I really want to find out what the name of that strip club was.

A: Oh, my God. It's just called the North Pole.

J: It's called the North Pole and all the strippers are named after Santa's reindeer.

A: I was surprised that like there are real businesses there, right? There's like a coffee shop that they would like go to and like people lived and worked there, which that would just be wild.

J: I think that's a desire that a lot of people have, especially around the holidays. They think, oh, wouldn't it be awesome if we could just like celebrate this holiday, this season all year long? But then you get in it and it just feels very kind of artificial and you don't appreciate it as much, I think.

A: Right. Yeah. Like I'm just thinking, you know, we're here in central Pennsylvania and I grew up here near Hershey and Hershey Park, right? And when I went to school outside of the city, like, oh, my gosh, you live 10 minutes away from Hershey. You must have gone there all the time. Like, how cool is that? You're so lucky. Like, oh, it's really crowded. It's hard to drive because there's so many tourists on there. Like for me growing up there, it wasn't that kind of natural experience that it is for other people. And that would just be really sad that, you know, to have that joy taken out of the Christmas village for me, you know, like it would be a great place to have an Airbnb to stay at, right? But I don't know that I could live there all the time.

J: Well, speaking of Airbnb there, the inn that all the stars stayed at was called the Edelweiss Inn. And it was completely decorated out for the holidays. But like in a really kind of—

A: It was like extreme, like.

J: Flat everywhere, candy cane patterns. And I think they also mentioned it didn't look incredibly clean. There was like some dust and other things too.

A: Yeah. Yeah. And when Bee first checks in, she goes to the elevator and like the owner kind of like cuts in front of her and puts an out of order sign on it. But then Bee mentions like that elevator probably hasn't been in operation for several years. So it's a little a little run down, but they hide it with the Christmas cheer to the best of their abilities. But it sounded, yeah, like Christmas overload in there. And there's, I forgot about the trolley, the trolley bus that will take people there.

J: So, yes, it's just a completely immersive experience. You go up there. It's like you are in a Christmas village because that's what it is.

A: I forgot about the map. I love a good map in a book.

J: Absolutely. Even if it's not a murder mystery, a map is still a really nice thing to have.

A: Yes.

J: So the movie that they are filming in Christmas Notch, Vermont, is called "Duke the Halls." The premise of this is Bee's character is in present day. She's engaged and getting married to somebody that she does not completely love. And she gets sent back in time to a magical England where Dukes look like former boy band members. Case in point, Nolan Shaw, who plays the Duke. And they fall in love and somehow she's able to go back to present day and then she goes back to the past. And of course, there are montages of horseback riding, all kinds of fun things. Like many Christmas movies, it doesn't completely make sense, but that's not going to stop people from enjoying it. So many Christmas movies starring like Vanessa Hudgens and other beautiful people doing seasonal things. Plot does not matter at all. People just watch it and enjoy it.

A: Yes, it doesn't need to make sense when all the people are beautiful. My parents had recently recommended that I watch this show called *Lost in Austen*, which I think is quite old. But have you seen that?

J: It has Cary Russell in it. I think I read the book when it came out. I've seen that. There are a couple of things that were very similar that came out at the same time. Another one had to do with the modern-day girl getting sent back and she was taking like Lizzie's role.

A: Yeah. Yeah. I feel like that was a trend for a while. Right. And so this felt exactly like that. Like, yeah, I watched I watched the show. It was like really cheesy. And, you know, the plot was silly and wasn't the best thing I've ever seen, but it was enjoyable. And so I feel like this was one of those kinds of movies, very, very similar kind of plot line. But throughout the book and right from the first day on set, there's no last page to the script. And so, you know, it's this cheesy Duke the Hoss movie, but they don't know how it's going to end.

J: It's like all these Christmas movies always have like some little catchphrase, like "the true meaning of Christmas is..." or this is what's important. And Pearl, despite having written the rest of the movie, has not been able to land on what the meaning of Christmas is or what the whole lesson was that our main two characters are supposed to learn.

A: So that made me chuckle because I feel like you're outlining a movie script, like if that's the thing that the whole plot revolves around, you should probably know what that is, right?

J: But again, not as important as having beautiful people doing seasonal things.

A: Yes, yes. Those little silly things that poked fun at the characters were, you know, just made them all the more charming because I really did enjoy Pearl and Gretchen and their dynamic. But also, you know, them as individual people in the book. But I just thought that was funny because they're just like, have you figured it out yet? Like what the true meaning of Christmas is?

J: And so Pearl's like stressing about this throughout the entire book because she cannot come up with something. And so you find her like constantly trying to like self-soothe. She's like wrapped up in a silver blanket, like outside trying to like cleanse herself. And yeah, the dynamic between her and Gretchen is very cute.

A: Yeah, but that was some serious, serious writer's block there for sure.

J: So a whole thing about these Christmas movies, especially ones on a certain channel, is that they're all incredibly wholesome.

A: Yeah, because there's like kind of a recipe, right, that they follow for every movie. And that's followed for the content of the movie itself, but also in who they cast, what they look like, how they are publicly viewed by the audience of the channel. And so this idea of, oh my gosh, if they find out that, you know, the main actress is a porn star, that'll just like, we can't show it then, right? So you have to keep it under wraps, like no one can find that out. But what does it matter if the movie itself, like that idea that the wholesomeness has to translate over into the person's real life? And I feel like sometimes you see that happen where an actor or a writer, I'm thinking of a particular instance where a writer was writing for a very popular, wholesome franchise. And then they saw how that author writes and interacts with people on social media. And they're like, that doesn't match with our brand, with our image. And so they dropped this person from publishing for that franchise. So those kinds of things, they seem silly to me, but it's very real, like it does happen. I struggle wrapping my mind around that. Like, why does it matter? It's clear that he's a good actress, and she's impressing a lot of people on set. But then there's the first kiss scene that they film early on, and the director catches her afterwards and is like, "you don't have to use tongue for these scenes." And she's like, really embarrassed that, like, that even happened. Like, of course, that's not a thing that this company, this channel wants.

J: Yeah, Bee's much more used to a lot more physical type of role in her career. She had not been aware that there was the "movie kissing," which is like, it's all about the appearance, nothing about what's actually happening. One thing I have been seeing a lot more recently, and I'm really happy about it, is the acceptance of LGBTQ people in movies. Like, the last few years, you've seen like maybe background characters in a couple of movies. And now there are ones coming out where the main character is a gay man, or the main character is a queer woman. And Ali Liebert, who has been in numerous holiday movies, is now getting to actually be a queer woman who falls in love with a woman in a Hallmark movie, which is super sweet.

A: That is nice. I didn't know that. So yeah, we're making progress. Maybe in a couple years, there will be a blend of, you know, cast and crew from different industries that have different levels of wholesomeness, or like have different definitions of wholesomeness, because, yeah.

J: Holiday movies are for everyone.

A: Yeah. That wraps up our discussion of *A Merry Little Meat Cute* by Julie Murphy and Sierra Simone. We'll see you next time when we discuss *Endpapers* by Jennifer Savron Kelly.



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