

## *Endpapers* 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.



Amber: Hi, my name is Amber. My pronouns are she/her.

Annika: My name is Annika. My pronouns are any and all. Give me all of them.

Amber: Collecting them like Pokemon.

Annika: Exactly.

Amber: Right? So, *Endpapers*. *Endpapers* was written by Jennifer Savran Kelly. Pronouns she/they. Jennifer Savran Kelly is a genderqueer writer, bookbinder, and production editor at Cornell University Press. *Endpapers* is her debut novel, though they have published a number of pieces of short fiction and nonfiction pieces.

Annika: So, the description of *Endpapers*: It's 2003, and artist Dawn Levit is stuck. A bookbinder who works at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, she spends all day repairing old books but hasn't created anything of her own in years. What's more, although she doesn't have a word for it yet, Dawn is genderqueer. Dawn spends her free time scouting the city's street art, hoping to find the inspiration that will break her artistic block. One day at work, Dawn discovers something hidden under the endpapers of an old book: the torn-off cover of a lesbian pulp novel from the 1950s, with an illustration of a woman looking into a mirror and seeing a man's face. Even more intriguing is the queer love letter written on the back. Dawn becomes obsessed with tracking down the author of the letter, convinced the mysterious writer can help her find her place in the world.

Amber: Alright, some content warning. Some content warnings are homophobia, violence, panic attacks, and anxiety. So this book was more literary than I anticipated.

Annika: Same.

Amber: Which is not usually the genre I am drawn to. The plot of finding the author of this letter was pretty good though.

Annika: Oh yes, having just read this description again, I realized how much stuff takes place a lot later in the book, and it's in the back of the book description. It's just kind of surprising.

Amber: The first thing I'm interested in talking about is it's set in 2003, which is very interesting for a book on this topic and for a main character with these things she's facing, because even in the last 20 years, things have changed a lot. But in 2003, like the book description said, we didn't even have a word for genderqueer.

Annika: Exactly.

Amber: Or at least a word that was well known enough that Dawn would have been aware of it. I'm interested in why the author decided to place it in 2003 as opposed to today.

Annika: Yeah, having been like around the same age as the main character in 2003, I kind of get why the author chose this period, mostly because before this period, I feel like it might have been a little bit too scary to come out as genderqueer. And after this period, it really wasn't even as much of a

worry at all. But the thing that I find interesting was that the choice of this time period, it is just a couple years after Matthew Shepard and James Burke Jr. were in the news for having been murdered just because they're gay. And it does give a lot more of immediacy, a feeling of maybe why the main character is struggling so much to try to come out, because there wasn't a word. I mean, having been a genderqueer person at that time, I didn't know that there was a word for that. So I mean, I really get it. That said, I also felt like I really should feel a lot more like this character spoke to me as a human being. She did not. But I mean, that's a whole other group of things to talk about. But yes, there's a whole lot of stuff that I wrote down for the time period. So I was doing almost like a fact-checking type thing while I was reading it, because I'm like, would that really happen? But at the same time, I don't know, it took me out of the book a little bit, because one of the main things that confused me a lot was texting. Now, in 2003, we didn't have smartphones yet. So if you wanted to text somebody, even if you had that little keyboard doohickey, which was not very common back then, you had to hit each number button as many times as humanly possible to get letters you want, which is why text speak became a thing, because you did not want to be sitting there pushing buttons for 20 minutes to write an entire sentence. So every time a text is like a whole paragraph, I'm like, no way is that girl going to type that out. No way. Also, text messages cost 25 cents a pop at that point, because unless you had this newfangled texting paid-for subscription, you had to pay for every single text you sent. So all these texts they're sending, I felt really, I don't know, I felt taken out of the book. I could not believe it, because I'm like, look, I was in 2003 sitting on my couch trying to figure out how to text my father something, and I'm like, is it worth 25 cents? Is it worth typing? And that's not really something you consider these days. But anyway, now that was my biggest beef, honestly. Oh, and the word queer. She does use the word queer once or twice, and I understand that that's something we've repatriated at this point. That's the wrong word. We've re—

Amber: Reclaimed?

Annika: Thank you. That's something we've reclaimed at this point. But in 2003, I don't really know anybody that was running around saying queer and wasn't.

Amber: I mean, the one time she said it, it was like kind of derogatory. I will say, okay, so we've talked about this book before now, and we both had some opinions about the main character, and I think, honestly, I wanted to sympathize with her, but as soon as she's used it as a slur for other queer people, I was like, hmm.

Annika: Yeah, yes, yes. Within the first couple pages, she's like, "I'm tired of these queers," and it's like, excuse me? She's like, hello. She does use it later on in the book as well, describing people under the LGBTQ+ umbrella. I think it was just author shorthand, because at that point, she's just like, look, I kind of have some way to describe everybody in one go. And this word is accepted now, so let's use that one.

Amber: It is a good umbrella word that we use now. I think the first time I heard it used like that was, I think it was in grad school, and a friend of mine used it, and I was like, what do you mean by that? And he was like, I'm queer. And I'm like, okay, but what? It's a much more widely used term, umbrella term, so.

Annika: Absolutely.

Amber: But yeah, so I think a lot of what the book was about was Dawn trying to figure out who she was and how she wanted to exist in the world, which, again, is something that's like, still something people struggle with, but definitely not the same as it would have been.

Annika: Thankfully, my own child and his friends can say in school, "hey, I'm queer," and the entire school ostracized them, which is unfortunately something that happened when I was in high school. Not to me, but that was a common thing. You just didn't come out. I mean, it's so much better at this

point. But yeah, I think definitely the immediacy and the feeling of fear is definitely a 2003 kind of thing. So it definitely fits with the time period.

Amber: Yes. And I think what makes Dawn's experience of that interesting is the way that people in her life interact with it, which I think is... I'm glad it wasn't an overall negative reaction. That did seem pleasantly unexpected.

Annika: Yeah, absolutely. What's interesting is the things that come across as negative, all the times that she's thinking, this person wants me to be like this, and this person wants me to be like this. I feel as the story goes on, you kind of get the feeling that those are things that she's thinking. And it's not necessarily what the other person is thinking. Now, in some cases, it does seem like maybe that person is thinking not pleasant things. But it seems that overall, as she kind of explained herself to people, it was generally pretty good. Nobody seems to really bat an eye. And they're like, yeah, just be who you are, which is amazing. That's how it should be.

Amber: To be fair, she works in a museum, which tends to be slightly more liberal-leaning environments.

Annika: Yeah, good point. And in the book-binding department, which I mean, a lot of marginalized people like to be in a away from the public kind of setting.

Amber: I found it so interesting that the author of the book is a bookbinder because it's just such a unique skill set to just have. So I think it's really cool that she made her main character have that profession.

Annika: 100%. And I'm going to be honest, I really, really wanted more bookbinding in the book. It really makes me very sad that you get like a tiny bit in the beginning. It's like, I'm going to sew up this binding. But then in the end, you get the real stuff where she's scraping things and taping and making glue. And I'm like, this is amazing. I want to know more. And then it's over. And it's like, oh, OK.

Amber: So some of the people, some of the main people in the book that we interact with are Dawn's partner, Lucas, her best friend, Jae. She has three coworkers that come in and out. And then the person who wrote the love letter on the back of the lesbian pulp novel cover, Gertrude. I think honestly, with this book, the point, I think, is not, I don't know if that's the point, but the meat of it is really her relationships with these people and how she represents herself to them and how they perceive her, with the exception of Gertrude, I think. Anyway, I mostly just want to talk about Lucas and how much I don't like him. I just need to make sure that that is noted.

Annika: Yes, Lucas is 100% villain in a book that has no villain.

Amber: Yeah, and he's portrayed in a way that you're just like, the character obviously still cares for him and is willing to give him the benefit of the doubt so much that you're just like, no, stop it.

Annika: He's just so dismissive of pretty much any conversation they have and dismissive of the idea of relationships in general. He just doesn't seem like a very quality boyfriend.

Amber: He doesn't. And he seems like one of the things that they always struggle with is he doesn't want them to have labels and he doesn't want to fit into a box. And yet whenever anything happens that does not sort of match what he wants out of the relationship, he gets like standoffish or dismissive of it. Like he very clearly wants to be with a man and he acts as though it's Dawn's problem that sometimes she doesn't feel masculine and sometimes she does. And it's almost as though he feels as though when she's feeling more feminine, that's like, that's a her problem. And I'm like, well, if you don't want to be with somebody with feminine features, don't, you know?

Annika: Absolutely. And just the fact that the one day that she puts on a dress and she's like, how do you like my dress? And he's like, it would look better on me. I'm just like, wow, did you have to say that?

Amber: What a rude thing to say to your partner as they're walking through the door.

Annika: Right? You look good, but I would look better. So I don't know, do with that what you want.

Amber: This is the Lucas haters club.

Annika: Yes.

Amber: I just want that stated for the record. Jae, however, is a sweetheart and honestly has done nothing wrong ever in his life. Yeah. Jae is just a nice person. And the few times he gets upset at Dawn, it is extremely valid. Like the few times when I'm like, can you not? I'm just like, yeah, same. But Dawn, she's so defensive all the time. For good reason, but she's so defensive to people who have absolutely not given her any reason to be, like especially with the nurses.

Annika: And especially since in that scene where she is getting defensive, it's not even about Jae's healthcare. It's about how she feels about how the nurse is treating the situation around the healthcare. It's like, stay on task here, Dawn. You want your friends to get better. You don't need to have a debate about queerness with the nurse at this point.

Amber: Right. And like, you're so right. Therapy is probably useful. But the more important part is the fact that he passed out. You know? I feel one problem at a time here.

Annika: Yeah. And in 2003, just in case any of you have forgotten, if you tried to get healthcare for mental issues, it went on your permanent record and you couldn't have health insurance anymore. So that's a very valid reason to not want to do that. So just saying.

Amber: I did not know. See?

Annika: Yeah.

Amber: Dawn needs to calm down.

Annika: Yes.

Amber: Like she has very valid reasons for like being like touchy about certain things. I just, they're valid, but I just, oh, they were so annoying.

Annika: Yeah, I agree. I mean, I guess I can kind of see how like living in a situation where you're constantly feeling not good enough, maybe you would be touchy about everything, but it makes it mildly exhausting to read about her. I'm like, I'm getting secondhand anxiety just listening to the things that she's worried about. And I'm like, oh my goodness, been there, done that.

Amber: That is what made it, made parts of it really hard to get through. Cause I'm like, this is not fun for me. I'm already, I already have anxiety and now I have your anxiety too. Thank you, Dawn.

Annika: Yes. Too real. Just too real.

Amber: I think— A note on literary fiction, I think it's very valuable in the general scheme of things. I just personally, I mean, it's not my vibe for that reason. I'm like, this is too real. No, thank you.

Annika: Yes.

Amber: Anyway, Gertrude, the objectively most interesting person in this book, the author of that love letter, she is the daughter of a bookbinder in, yeah, the 1950s, which is when the book that had the love note in the end papers was found. A big question that Dawn is working through while she's trying to investigate this is how it ended up there. And obviously it cannot tell you because of the spoilers, but Gertrude is so interesting at this point in the book. She's, I don't know how old she is, she's very old and she is—I don't know if it's a spoiler to say—she's in hospice. She's like going to die soon. If that is a spoiler, please, you know—

Annika: I don't think so because like, I mean, some of the stuff in the back of book description happens way after you find out that Gertrude's in hospice. So.

Amber: True. Okay. Well, Gertrude is in hospice by the time Dawn finally finds her. And her story is by far the most interesting part of the book because you get, she's figuring out how this love letter got found in the first place. We hear about Gertrude and the girl she likes, she wrote the letter to in the 1950s and what that was like. And something that neither of us noticed, but was in some discussion questions we were looking at was the parallel between a moment in Gertrude's story and a moment in Dawn's story. So that was so interesting. Just the digging up information on Gertrude and how this letter could have ended up there. And yeah.

Annika: Yes. And like some of the stuff that Gertrude talked about from her history, it just like made my soul so happy. I don't know if I really want to say too much because like it's kind of soul story to have like the interesting stuff from the 50s. But just know that there is some very pleasant stuff that happens and a group of ladies working together to make life a little bit better for everybody through books, which is the best way to make life a little better for everyone.

Amber: Agreed. The other like major part of this book was Dawn's art project. She was gonna have her work in an upcoming gallery debut even though she did not have anything to present. So a lot of the book is Dawn creating this art and trying to figure out what she wants to say with it and how she's gonna make it happen. Something that I was intrigued by is that she was asked to make a book which is not something that I've ever encountered in like an art gallery traditionally. Like is that, have you seen that anywhere?

Annika: I have not. That also kind of confused me. I just have to wonder if it's partially because the way she got into the art gallery was through Jae's sister. So I have to wonder how much of that was based on what Jae's sister knows of Dawn. Because she knows that she works in a book-bindery and it seemed like she was working throughout on something to do with her art and a book because she starts in the beginning having found a book of her art and it's like, I don't really, I'm not feeling this. So I mean, it seems like it just kind of follows maybe past conversations that Jae had with his sister. I do have to say, I really wish I could see the project.

Amber: Yeah.

Annika: It sounds awesome.

Amber: It sounds so interesting. The type of art that Dawn tends to be drawn to is all street art. And her final project is both a book that can be closed but also like a piece unto itself that can be like expanded which just sounds so interesting. And it's, I don't even think heavily influenced is a good descriptor of, it just is street art.

Annika: I mean, pretty literally.

Amber: Yeah, it literally is street art. But it's so interesting. And the type of people that he brings together is fascinating. And just queer people creating art of a world that they wish they lived in.

Annika: Right. Post 9/11, which also goes for why it was set in this time period as well because post 9/11 was big time for street art and expressing self through street art especially in NYC. So perfect timing for that. Let's talk about gender for a minute here. There was no accepted gender-neutral pronoun in that time period. Even though the main character is described as she/her by others throughout the book I almost feel a little weird talking about Dawn without using they.

Amber: Yes, I feel like today Dawn's pronouns would probably be they or like any pronouns depending on the day.

Annika: Yeah. Right.

Amber: Or actually I have some friends with neo pronouns which are just so interesting.

Annika: Yeah, very cool. Yeah, not everybody can collect them all like me. The LGBTQ all at once? Yeah. That's right. Alright, just because I'm going through my notes. I wrote down a bunch of quotes that I really enjoyed. So here we go. "Courage has no gender." "I'm exhausted from having to stand up for something rather than let myself want things."

Amber: That one is one that I wrote down as well.

Annika: Yeah.

Amber: That's a good one.

Annika: Yeah, and absolutely relatable too because especially when you're caught in the middle of fighting for something it's hard to remember that you're just allowed to be a person too. "Maybe the important thing is simply to have a voice. The important thing is not to hide." And one of my favorites is: "I go to sleep a girl, dream a boy's dreams, and wake up as neither." That resonated. It really did. I don't often read a book where I read a line and I'm like, wow, that is so me. Not to be like hashtag-millennial., "That's so me." I mean, it really is. I'm like, I don't really feel seen right now. And it's nice to read a book where I feel represented. And you don't get a lot of stories with people who are genderqueer. You get stuff where non-binary people and trans folks but you don't get a whole lot from the genderqueer community. And it was really nice to actually get to read a book with the main character that is genderqueer. Even though the whole storyline is finding that out in herself and like accepting that. I mean, it seems like every time there's something new in literature, it usually starts out with that kind of thing. So from here on, we could have a lot more genderqueer characters that don't have to go through that because the literature before has already done it. Also, I think Gertrude was a Trekkie because she says, "go forth boldly."

Amber: I missed that. That's fantastic. I mean, yeah, that would track.

Annika: Yeah, absolutely. As soon as I read that, I was like, ooh, Trekkie.

Amber: I love that for her. Gertrude is an icon. Yeah, I love her so much. I wish we had gotten so much more about her. Obviously, we got this stuff about the letter and her being her queer little self in the 50s.

Annika: Her secret society almost.

Amber: My gosh.

Annika: Another thing that I noticed that was very interesting was one of the books that we read before was *Last Night at the Telegraph Club*. And a lot of the story in that one as well had a lot to do with the old pulp queer novels where because of the morality mandate, books that had to do with queer relationships were forced to end poorly. But yet at the same time, both of these books showed

that even though they were forced to end that way, the people within the community still loved reading them because they felt represented. And I mean, I feel like that's still a big thing today is that even if the stories aren't perfect all the time, it is a beautiful thing to be able to read about yourself and to connect with others based on reading about yourself. I just thought that was very interesting that both of those books specifically used those 50s pulp novels as a way of connection.

Amber: Yeah. There's a book, and this is about like movies and media, but it's called *The Celluloid Closet*. And there's a documentary that was based off of it. I cannot remember the author's name at this point, but he was a gay rights activist, that people in the business now would talk about these representations. And like the pulp novels with very few exceptions, they ended poorly because they had to, or they were these wild stereotypes, but because those were the only queer people to be seen at all, the people in that business now when they were younger seeing those loved them because that was their only representation.

Annika: Absolutely. Representation matters. Ah, another thing that I wanted to mention completely off script at this point, but it seems like a main theme in this is art and books are a way to be seen without being scrutinized, which is two very different things. Like she was talking about Alice's eyes, where the eyes were looking out from the art. And Alice is one of the— sorry—

Amber: Alice is one of the street artists.

Annika: Yes. But anyhow, she did eyes as street art. And when Dawn came across them, she said that she felt like she was being seen in a way that... I don't know. I lost my train of thought. [laughter]

Amber: No, I think I know what you're talking about. So the eyes saw her in a way that I think only queer people would recognize, even though Alice later tells Dawn that they were meant to be like a scrutinization of other people. Dawn found them as seeing, as other queer people being able to feel seen.

Annika: Yeah.

Amber: So if you recognize it and you recognize that you are the person who it is for, it's like more of a comfort. Whereas if it is read the way that Alice intended it to people outside the community, it's almost like a judgment.

Annika: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, that was way better than what I was trying to say. I don't know how this is even gonna fit in, but I also came across the thought: We often think of the experiences of older folks as history far removed, but for them, it's still affecting them. So like when, I keep thinking Gertrude for everyone, when Dawn's hearing Gertrude's story she's like, Ah yes, the past. But for Gertrude, it was still immediate for her. And it's just interesting to think that because, I mean, as historians, seeing as both of us are historians, it's easy to look at experiences from the past and be like, "well that's over." But, this book did put in perspective that a lot of things, even if they were in the past, really aren't over. They are ongoing. Even if we don't really see the movement quite as much as we would've had we been in that past situation.



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