

Narrator: Welcome to Reading the Rainbow, Brought to you by the Dauphin County Library System. For the book-curious looking for their next LGBTQ+ read, listen in as queer library staff discuss the own voice stories they have been reading.

Em: Hi, my name is Em, and I use they/them pronouns.

Annika: My name is Annika, and any pronoun is good for me.

RD: I'm RD And I use he/him pronouns.

Em: We have a very special guest today, obviously RD, um, thank you so much for being here with us, ah, I'm going to give a little intro for RD.

Em: RD is a queer fiction author and engineer who has been penning literary adventures since age 9. He is the author of "In Death Do Flowers Grow," "A Vast Untethered Ocean," "A Sky Littered with Stories," and most recently, the subject of today's episode, "Design of Darkness." He currently lives in Sacramento, California with his husband.

RD: Thank you so much for having me!

Em: Thanks so much for being here!

Annika: So, to give everybody an idea of what this book is about, "The shadow of the great usurper, King Fogosombre, has kept the East in darkness for twelve long years. Made paranoid by a foretelling of his downfall, the king's indiscriminate violence reaches a new zenith, leaving twins Arsenio and Mariana orphaned and homeless, their village burnt to the ground. Now, as the dying embers of their rebellion fade into the night, the twins make a promise to find aid for their people in foreign lands. To get out from under the king's reach, they must venture across the Great Ocean into a world they had only dreamt about through travelers' stories. From their perilous quest arises a tale of emperors and queens, marauders and mysticism, fortitude and forbidden love. Meanwhile, King Fogosombre conducts profane rituals driven by his lust for indomitability. Toiling with malign magic that may yield dire consequences for all the known world, he seeks a pact with the shadows, a plan to cement his reign indefinitely: a design of darkness." Which, of course, sounds awesome.

Em: Yeah!

RD: I realized as you were reading it, I was like aw, I made that such a tongue twister. [laughter]

Em: That's okay, it's really compelling. I'm so excited that we get to talk to you about it, and Annika came up with some really good questions – at least I think they're really good questions, um, for us to kind of talk about the book and your sort of, you know, what compelled you to write it and why, how you felt when you were writing it, um, but when we- when we talk about

these books, we like to talk first about our first impressions and opinions. Um, which I really enjoyed this book, I'm not just saying that because you're here with us, I- I really did enjoy this book quite a lot.

Em: I thought the characters were, I loved the dynamic between Arsenio and Mariana because they're just such different characters with such different motivations that are thrust into the same circumstance, which, you know, it's- it's interesting to see how they navigate this new life and- and teens who are sort of forced to be on the run, and reckon with an incredible amount of violence not only in their hometown, but just in general. Right? I don't know, what did you think Annika?

Annika: Yeah, I agree, uh, there's so many twists and turns in here, you kind of think you know where it's going, and then suddenly you're like, oh, I didn't see that coming! And it still works very nicely. [laughter]

RD: Well thank you very much, both of you, I'm so excited that you enjoyed it. That's always like, the biggest fear once a book goes out into the world, it's like, oh how will people take it?

Annika: Yes, absolutely. [laughter]

Em: So, we can talk a little bit about um, some of the characters, we don't want to talk too much about some of the characters that appear later on in the novel because then we're getting a little bit into spoiler territory, and we don't want to- we, we want to tow that line really carefully. We want to tell people like, hey, this book is good, and these characters are really compelling and here's why, but we don't want them to know who shows up later, necessarily. So yeah. We've got Mariana and Arsenio who are, I don't want to say protagonists, because one of the cool things that I really liked about this book is that there's many different perspectives that we get to see from. It gave me sort of the same impression as reading, like, a Game of Thrones book for the first time, right?

Em: Nothing really like that at all [laughter] but in a sense of like having this, this vast world that- and I know you said you were really excited to talk about worldbuilding and I'm really excited to hear from you about it, because I think you've created such an interesting, dynamic world with such, like, vastly different cultures, and I think you do a really good job distinguishing those places and also giving us perspectives from people in those different places before they inevitably all, you know, kind of come together right? And that was something that was really keeping me reading, was like how are these people going to come to- what's going to happen from all these different points in our world, and I just thought that was really cool. So, we've got Mariana and Arsenio Avilla who we open the book with, and they are thrust into tragedy right away, right? Um, Corvi sum Rio is where they are from, this village, and their parents are involved in a rebellion against this tyrant king Fogosombre and their- their mother

is killed in front of Mariana's eyes, I don't think that's a spoiler because it happens in chapter one right away [laughter].

Em: Very quickly, like I said, these twins are thrust into great tragedy, and then are forced to reckon with what it means to be, like, a revolutionary! And at what point do you stop fighting and why, and that was something that was really compelling to me right away was this conversation that Mariana has with her father and with Galina and why she decides like, because she thinks like, the village has been attacked, we're done. That's it for the rebellion. And then she realizes like, oh no, people will die if we're going to get the result that we want, and there will be violence, and what does that look like? And how do you sort of compel yourself to keep going through that and the differences between how she handles that and how Arsenio handles that, again I just thought were, was- was really compelling from like a character standpoint.

Em: And then we have the reluctant emperor Kaori. Am I saying that correctly? You were so great, one of the other things, sorry I'm kind of just rambling, but something I really appreciated with this is the pronunciation guide at the end, which I should have referenced a little bit more while I was going through reading [laughter] but I really, I always appreciate it when that's like something that an author adds in because, you know, sometimes you can read something one way and it's not at all the way that the author intended for it to be. Like, heard in one's mind. And so I really appreciated that. But yeah we've got the emperor Kaori who is also very young and also immediately thrust into this position of power, he's elected the new emperor of Nokara and he doesn't really know what to do with that because he's a young man, and, it's the, these sort of very adult situations that our teen protagonists are kind of forced to reckon with I think is just a really, I don't know I thought it was really good YA for that reason. Right? Annika do you want to talk about some of the other characters? Sorry I feel like I'm chattering away.

Annika: So yeah I loved the relationship between Arsenio and his sisters, just in the beginning, it's very nice to see a younger uh, character who actually gets along with their family because I feel like a lot of teen protagonists have sort of that, the big thing in their way is that they don't get along with mom or whatever.

RD: Yeah

Annika: So I really enjoyed that really both of the families that are portrayed get along with their siblings and parents uh, very well, and I did appreciate that. Also, the fact that it is uh, sort of, uh, an epic fantasy for a YA audience, I felt like that was very appreciable too since a lot of the modern, um, [train horn] Did you hear the train, just then?

RD: Just a little bit. Um, just one thing really quick before you go, we are not really marketing this for YA, I know the protagonists are younger but we are kind of making this an adult fantasy, I think just because of some of the themes and the violence it does lend itself more to adult.

Annika: Yeah.

RD: That's alright.

Em; Yeah that is, that's fine!

Annika: That's why I said younger protagonists the first time because I wasn't sure, but then I was like [unintelligible] so it's got to be YA, right? [laughter]

RD: Yeah it's always a hard line to walk of like, you know, your protagonist's age is usually indicative of, of who the audience inten- the intended audience is, and um, that was kind of something that me and the people at Midnight Meadow had to talk about, uh, you know, who is this written for, and is that reflected in the, uh, the characters.

Annika: [unintelligible]

Em: Well, I apologize, for-

RD: No you're good you're so good.

Em: -incorrectly. [laughter]

Em: Why don't we talk a little bit about the world and what, I guess your, not necessarily inspirations, but what were you trying to accomplish, I guess, with the world you were creating, and why did you choose this particular setting, and to- to put our characters in such descript locations.

RD: I'd love to say that like, I've been a really big fan of fantasy, especially epic fantasy, and I think one of the things that struck me as I've been writing is that there's quite a lot of, I'd say Eurocentric fantasy, you know, the, the standard fantasy setting is like very reminiscent of like English, that sort of thing, um, which, you know is fine and I love lots of Eurocentric fantasy, um, types, uh, but I wanted to explore, uh, different settings. In particular I really like the Kailon setting in here which is largely inspired by the Philippines and southeast Asia, which is part of my background, my mother is Filipino. And so I, I think, I also, one of the things I, I really like in mythology, I've always been really into the mythology so I wanted to bring in some of those influences into the locations, um, that I created for the book. And so, uh, you know there, I think it's easy in some ways to see where some of these places are in- influenced by, you know, the islands they're Kailon, like I said, and then Faron is very much the Iberian Peninsula, which is, um, where my father's family is from. And then Nokara being east Asia. I wanted to kind of tap into places that weren't necessarily the standards for epic fantasy settings. And I had a lot

of fun with that and I think it provided a lot of color to a book that could have been very dreary and, and black and white in tone, I mean. So yeah, that's kind of where the settings came from.

Em: Yeah, I couldn't agree more with you in terms of giving the, the story color, because it is a little dark! Right? Um, it's, it's not necessarily a happy quest that, that these teens are on, right. And I am also a big fantasy fan and it was so refreshing to read this book and to feel like, oh, this is a whole world inspired by places that I don't usually read books inspired about. Right, and like, I really, I really enjoyed that aspect of it and seeing how those different things came into play like culturally, and also aesthetically, and hearing that that's part of your background too is, it's, I think that's really cool. I appreciate that you brought, you know, some of your own personal connections to this in a way that is very, I cannot- I can't think of a better word than refreshing [laughter] but it really is refreshing to like read a fantasy that doesn't read in the same way that I think a lot of stuff reads. I think it gave it a breath of fresh air for sure.

Annika: I too am a, a big fan of fantasy and um, I haven't read a lot lately just because it was so you know, everything is English, European, medieval, type stuff. But just the fact that there's so much light and brightness in this just, it, it spoke to me a lot more than the drab and [laughter]. Like, just the fact that it's winter and there's not a mention of snow is amazing [laughter]. So, uh, another question for you, we have a couple about characters, so who was your favorite character to write, your favorite point-of-view character?

RD: Ooh that's a, that's a difficult one. There, as you've mentioned, there are a lot of perspective characters in the story and I think it always changes as I was writing it, particularly by book. I think in the first book my favorite was Kaori. I think there's a lot of his personality in my personality so it, it is really fun to write him and envisioning like, how I would react to some of these situations not that I'm, you know ever going to be an emperor but [laughter] uh, from the perspective of his reactions, and kind of the character development that he goes through finding his own voice, he's very timid at the beginning, very much questioning his own ability to do the tasks that are given to him. I think by the end he has, if not fully gone into being confident, at least has started taking steps towards that confidence.

Annika: Yeah, he feels like a very believable kind of guy because, oftentimes you get these characters that are put into these crazy situations and they're like, oh yes! I am immediately great at everything [laughter] (RD: yeah) and he's like, second guessing himself and I'm like, yes, I can definitely relate to this character [laughter].

RD: Which is also a really fine line to walk, right, because if you make him too, you know, indecisive, then I feel like a lot of readers will find him annoying and like, you know, get on with it, which has its own problems but yeah, finding that line to walk of where like he is still a

character who is keeping his story going while being indecisive and figuring out his own voice was important to me.

Annika: Yes, I think you do that pretty well. Thank you.

Em: Yeah, he was one of my favorite characters to hear from, because I was really interested to see how he was, like you said, going to respond to these, these new situations. And his growth over the course of the novel I felt was very, yeah believable. He was a kid who I'm like, oh I know, I don't know him obviously but like I could see, you know, people that I know responding in the same way. And some of the things that he is hesitant to do, as this now crowned emperor, it felt very realistic to me in the sense that like, he's just a lad, you know? [laughter] And he's doing the best he can!

Em: He's just a little lad and like there's precedent, like there's an incredible precedent, the emperor previous to him was beloved, and so he, not only was he thrust into this new role with an incredible amount of power, but he also has very large shoes to fill, right, and I think that that makes him such an interesting character to follow because he's, his responses are, you know, as measured as they can be for, for a- is he seventeen? That was something that I was wondering. How, how old is he? Because I don't remember if it ever explicitly says his age, and I apologize if I skimmed over it. [laughter]

RD: I think it's in, maybe if it does mention his age it probably mentions it once, he is eighteen.

Em: Okay. That, I was wondering, because I remembered he has a conversation with Taigen? Um and he says they always pick somebody whose eighteen and then I was like oh, so he's not quite eighteen? But that makes sense, then, he was just expecting the council to pick an emperor who was maybe a little bit older but they wanted someone who was, who was young. So I appreciate that, thank you for the clarity. Um, but yeah he was he was one of my favorite characters. And Mariana, I loved her, she was-

RD: She's really fun to write, yeah.

Annika: She's sassy.

RD: I love her sassiness, yeah.

Em: For sure!

RD: Another fun one to write um, was Queen Yiscel, um, just because she is, I feel a very stark contrast from a lot of the other characters where she is, you know she is a veteran at what she does and she knows her responses, she knows what she thinks is best and she's not afraid to go after those things and to, you know, argue with people who don't agree with her. So that was another fun character to write, yeah.

Annika: Speaking of Queen Yiscel, uh, how do I adopt a **Kaicat** [laughter].

RD: Oh, if you, when you find out let me know too because I would love one as well [laughter]. That was a fun, yeah, that was a fun little part of worldbuilding too where it was like, you know, everything could be really important to the plot and just, you only reveal things that make a lot of sense but I don't- why do you- you have to flesh out a world somehow, and I feel like just having random little, random little critters going around is such a great way to make a place feel more real and lived in.

Annika: Absolutely, and I'm always going to find the little critters and be like, that's my favorite.

Em: Yeah, there's nothing like flora and fauna to really like set a scene, right? Like I need, I need that in a book, actually, if I'm going to really get into it. If you're not telling me what the surroundings look like, if you're not telling me little critters are running around, I don't care, I'm sorry, like I need to know! Um, so, sorry, go ahead.

Annika: I was going to say I do feel like you did a very good job at setting the scene, I never felt like I didn't have enough information to picture where things were and, so, very good on that too.

RD: Thank you, yeah. That was, uh, the result of a lot of editing I think. [laughter]

Em: So, our next question for you, um, which I think is going to be an interesting one to talk about, whose story arc resonated the most with you? What character do you feel like their conclusion was the most meaningful, I suppose, to you personally.

RD: Ooh that's uh, that's a difficult one. I-I know that's the standard stock answer to every question. There are characters whose arcs over the entire series I think I would answer with but I don't want to spoil anything so I'm going to say for book one, and this is maybe the boring answer, I think maybe Kaori is probably the one that resonates the most with me, um, because I just feel like with him, you get more of a clear arc from one book, whereas I feel like maybe some of the other characters their arcs don't come into focus really until later in the story. Or later in the series. And I think yeah, again that struggle of being indecisive and second guessing yourself and kind of beginning that journey of finding your voice was really a driving factor for me in writing, uh, the first novel, and writing his character in general.

Annika: So how did you decide which characters would be your point of view characters? Because you do have several of them, so I was wondering how you chose.

RD: I think the, the, probably the best answer is, is who would provide the most insight into the scene, and I think that does get tricky because this, the first book has seven points of view, which I realize is a lot, and the second book has more than seven, so it does start to- as the

story gets more complicated it does start to get a little more ridiculous but I would say yeah, the short answer is that its, its who would provide the best insight into the scene, but also I think who would provide the most interesting insight. One of the things that I got a lot of comments about from beta readers was there were some surprises regarding which scenes were from whose perspective, and I don't really want to spoil anything, but one of them is the- our first Queen Yiscel point of view.

RD: I got a lot of comments on where, you know that could have been from, you know, Mariana's perspective and painted Queen Yiscel in a really bad light. But because we got that interaction from Yiscel's point of view, you kind of see more where she's coming from and that prevents you from, as a reader hopefully, from having a bad taste in your mouth the first time she comes around. And I think that was important to me as a writer, not only because it kept the scene maybe a little more interesting than a straightforward this is Mariana's perspective, but also, keeping in mind that I want the readers to like Yiscel and I want them to understand why she has the reaction that she does in her first scene. So. I- being able to give her, give her thoughts was really important and so that's I think the main criteria for deciding who gets which scenes in the book.

Annika: That makes sense. I- I do appreciate that we got her point of view at that point too, because I feel like seeing the festival, I mean that's not really a spoiler its a festival [laughter] seeing the festival through her eyes you get to know actually a lot more about it than if you would have seen it from Mariana's, who would have just been like oh, bright colors! [laughter] Flowers!

RD: Yeah.

Em: Yeah, we get all these nuances that we wouldn't have otherwise, and I think that lends itself really well to this sort of grand story that we're reading. Right?

Annika: Absolutely.

Em: Like having as many different perspectives as possible, which like, I'm excited for more than seven people [laughter] for the next, for the next book, like give me as many character thoughts as possible. I love that. Um, it can get a little confusing but I'll take notes its fine. [laughter]

RD: Glad to hear that.

Em: Yeah, well I think it- it's always nice to, I love an omniscient third person, I love way more when I get to hear from the characters themselves, right. Um and, and see through their eyes a little bit in in a way that is like, again adds a little bit more nuance, because different characters have vastly different interpretations of certain settings and it, it really makes the cogs turn in your brain while you're reading to get those bits and pieces from other people that, that add

more context to the much larger story. And I thought that, I thought you did a really good job of that, and I, it's, I really enjoyed, I really enjoyed it. I liked all of the characters, I liked hearing from them.

RD: Thank you. And since we're talking about the flower festival, I think another thing that was really important with that scene too, talking about nuance, is that, you know if that scene is seen from Mariana's eyes only, then, you know, the flower festival like you said is just colors and lights, whereas you can add some history if you have it through Yiscel's eyes because you know she's kind of tired of it, right? Like she's, enjoys the flower festival but she's kind of like yeah, I kind of want it to be over, like I have to be present for it all day, and you know you get the different like, one person might be completely in awe, and the other person is like, yeah I've been here, I want to go home now. Which I think we can probably relate to as well.

Annika: Yeah [laughter] I feel that way often.

Em. So, we talked about this a little bit already, in terms of like worldbuilding, and- and drawing on your own personal influence, were there any other big influences that were instrumental to your creation of this world? Like is there anything, sorry, I phrased that very strangely [laughter] it's, there, were there any, aside from what we've already talked about, right, what sort of inspired you to write this book?

RD: It's so hard to answer that question because it's like everything I want to say, inspired it, uh, like I touched on you know, wanting to have different cultural backgrounds for an epic fantasy, wanting to write my own epic fantasy was a, a, something I wanted to try to do for a really long time, and if I'm being completely honest I, this did kind of come out of the end of *Game of Thrones*, because I was watching that eighth season that, you know, we all have opinions on, and, kind of you know, having, my reaction was not very positive to it and thinking to myself, you know, why, why do I have this reaction, what would I do differently if I think that I can do, do, if I think I can do it better why is that? And then kind of realizing you know, I can't really hate on the, the writers unless I'm willing to try it out myself. And that was kind of the impetus to be like okay, you have all these notes, you have all these ideas, put them together and just write something. And you know in the way *Game of Thrones* was a catalyst, and I hope people will think, it is similar in the respect that there are all the multiple point of views, but I hope nobody thinks like oh this is a *Game of Thrones* copy because the story is vastly different, um.

Em; No, it reads totally differently, does not read the same at all, take- take heart it's not, it's not a, you know, *Game of Thrones* copy paste. The only reason I made that comparison was really because of, like, the multiple perspectives from all over the world map. But yeah, I- I totally, yeah I really appreciate that answer, that's such an honest [laughter] like answer as to like why, and I think that your motivation makes a lot of sense! Because there have been times

where I have been reading specifically fantasy, where I'm like, why did they make this choice? Why, why is this the conclusion that was drawn? And specific to character arcs too I'm like why create this incredibly compelling character and then have them end up where they do, which is, it can be really frustrating sometimes and so I, I really appreciate the saying like well, if I'm going to complain I might as well do, like try it myself. [laughter] Thats so real. Thats so real and I appreciate that.

RD: And maybe, you know, I'll get to the end and people will have the same thoughts about me, and I'll be like you know I tried, but hopefully that won't be the case. [laughter]

Em: Everyone's a critic, right?

RD: And you cant satisfy everyone, right? Like I'm sure there are going to be people who get to the end and are like, oh I wanted this to happen, but you know, hopefully more people than not will, will appreciate where everyone ends up.

Annika: At least I don't get the impression that you're actively messing with us so like, [laughter] that's a good thing.

RD: And I guess as far as other influences too, I should name, I did grow up like watching anime, I think that has definitely influenced my storytelling. I love like Chinese martial arts films, *House of Flying Daggers* is one of my favorite films and I think there's some influences from that that do show up in later books. And like I said before, just like being a mythology fan, there were a lot of, there is a lot of inspiration from like Philippine mythology that shows up in the book so, those are all things that came together to form this story and the way it was told.

Annika: *House of Flying Daggers* that's such a good movie oh my gosh.

RD: Yeah, I love that movie, I've probably seen it like twenty times and I still cry every time at the end.

Annika: Yes.

RD: And just, you know, like the colors and the action and the melodrama. My husband always laughs at me because he says I love really melodramatic films, and you know, if you're going to go emotional why not go like fully emotional.

Annika: Exactly! Jump in that well [laughter].

RD: Yeah. If I want to cry, I want to sob, okay?

Annika: For our listeners, don't try to read this at work because there are some things that will make you feel emotional in here, and don't be like me and be like sitting at work and people are like, are you okay? I'm just like, I'm fine! [laughter]

RD: There's just a branch in my eye, it's okay. [laughter]

Em: So my question is when can we expect the next installment, when, when's it coming out? If you can tell us, if you can't that's fine [laughter] also no pressure, sorry, that's maybe a stressful question

RD: Oh yeah, no, no worries at all actually, I will say that the editors at Midnight Meadow do have the second book manuscript. I don't know when, there's no date yet set for a release, it will be whenever we figure out that it's ready, um, for publication, but hopefully in the next year, year and a half, or something like that. And I will also say that I may or may not already have a draft for part three, and I may be working on the fourth book, so yeah.

Annika: Wow, nice.

Em: Incredible.

Annika: Good to know that we won't be waiting forever.

RD: Another allusion to *Game*- George R. R. Martin [laughter]. There's a lot of pressure I won't say anything bad about him, I think he's under a lot of pressure right now, a lot of projects. But I do not intend to leave readers waiting, you know, decades in between the next installment.

Annika: Oh good, yeah.

Em: Yeah thank god for that. There's nothing like reading the first installment of a really really incredible epic fantasy and then being like, well, I guess I'll bide my time in agony, wondering and creating all these head canons [laughter] and I think that's part of the reason too why like, we talked about this a little bit, is like disappointment in, in future installments of something that, like you're waiting for for a long time. I think that that enables people to build up expectations that may not always be met. So I'm very excited, um, (Annika: No, for sure) for the next, um [laughter] very excited for the next installment! Is there anything else that you really really want readers to know about this book? What is, if anything, do you want readers to take away from *Design of Darkness*?

RD: No, I- just the, I hope people like it, I had such a good, great time plotting out the series and writing the books and getting to know the characters myself that I hope that all of that translates, and it's really nice to hear from the both of you that you enjoyed it, and I hope that continues on for all other readers. And thank you for, you know, reading the book and I hope people feel compelled, whether or not they like it, to leave a review because reviews are the lifeblood of independent publishing. Yeah, I don't know, I hope they like it, that's all I can do. [laughter]

Em: Well, we would tell you if we didn't like it. Annika I hope I'm not over speaking for you, we're both very picky readers I'd like to say so, like, (Annika: That's very true) if we didn't like it I don't think we'd have, we'd be nice about it, but we wouldn't have any qualms about being like, I didn't like that, why did you do this, so like really, I- I can't recommend this enough. I think it's really, it was really a. well, it was a fun read. A sad read, a hard read at times. But, I really, I really enjoyed it and I really appreciated like I said, the new sort of settings that we don't always get in, in fantasy, and, and hearing from you that it's, you know, drawn a lot from your own, um, family history and background and personal interest just makes it even more, I don't know, tasty. [laughter] I can't think of a better word, just like, I, it was really good, I really liked it, and thank you so much for, for talking with us today, and- and taking the time, it's so nice to, to chat with you and, um, yeah.

RD: Thank you both for your honesty, it was really fun to uh, chat with you, I was definitely nervous I haven't really done an interview before on a podcast, so this is a very fun experience, I'm glad we got to do it.

Em: Yeah! It was so nice to meet you, thank you so much.

Annika: That wraps up our discussion of *Design of Darkness* by RD Pires.

Narrator: This has been reading the rainbow, the Dauphin County Library System podcast for books by and about the LGBTQ+ community. If you enjoyed this podcast, please follow us for new book discussions. And if we piqued your interest in this episode's selection, consider borrowing it from your local library, or purchasing it from Midnight Meadow Publishing. Thanks for listening!

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