

Gravity's Fire 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. My pronouns are she/they.

Goldie: My name is Goldie and my pronouns are she/her.

A: Today we have a special episode of Reading the Rainbow. We have an author interview with C.J. Aralore for you all to talk about his upcoming, well, probably published book by the time you're listening to this, *Gravity's Fire*. C.J. uses he/him pronouns, writes speculative fiction with a special love for romantasy. I love that word, by the way. His writing is heavily influenced by constantly daydreaming as a child, searching for his soulmate as a teen, and building a life with the man of his dreams as an adult. In addition to writing, he enjoys making crafts, dollhouse miniatures, drawing, music, and spending time with his longtime partner and their animal children. He lives in California, where he has spent most of his adult life working at libraries and helping people find their own quietly life-saving stories. So welcome, C.J.

C.J.: Hi, thank you for having me.

A: This is really exciting because I did not realize that you worked at libraries until reading your bio, so we all have that in common.

C: Yeah, I've spent most of my adult life working at libraries. Well, actually, [inaudible].

A: Yeah, that's wonderful. And dollhouse miniatures, I'm very curious about that. But we're here to talk about your book. So we're here to talk about C.J.'s book, *Gravity's Fire*. Jason June meets F.T. Lukens in this YA debut that's two parts fluffy romcom, one part contemporary fantasy, and all epic love story. First love is magic. Sometimes literally. Sixteen-year-old Phoenix "Nix" Ashwell has spent his whole life looking for his soulmate. He's also spent that life living a lie. After discovering his parents kidnapped him as an infant, he runs away to a town built inside an ancient crater to search for clues about his past. And, no, he's totally not there to look for a boyfriend. That is, until he meets Max, a boy straight out of his dreams. Okay, fine, he's definitely there for a boyfriend. Desperate to be closer to Max, Nix takes a series of bizarre tests to get into the special program he's part of. There's just one problem: Max is magic. And, after unknowingly cheating on the tests, everyone thinks Nix is magic too—including a group of ex-students whose attempts to reveal magic to the world put Max in danger. Now Nix has way more to worry about than figuring out if Max is flirting with him or just super nice. He'll have to find his own magic to protect the guy he's falling so hard for he's seeing stars. But then he learns his birth parents are hiding even more secrets than the ones he ran away from—one being that he was born to wield the most dangerous kind of magic. He's faced with an impossible choice: risk the life of the boy he's spent his whole life looking for or let him go to save him. What began as a quest to find where he belongs becomes a battle between the fire of who he is and the gravity of who he loves. Oh, I love this new description, CJ.

C: Thank you.

G: Did you have a soundtrack you were listening to while writing *Gravity Spire*?

C: No, not while writing it. I made a playlist after I was done writing the story and found songs with lyrics and styles that seemed to fit, but I did listen to music before I began writing. That's actually how I come up with a lot of themes. I'll be listening to music and the emotional feel of the song, not

necessarily the lyrics, but what makes things play out in my mind. Like watching a movie unfold. I don't have any forethought or control over what's going to happen. It just plays out. All I need to do is write a few notes to remember later, and if I read it again, I'll see it playing out in my mind. Listening to the same song doesn't even bring back the images for some reason. But once I go to write the story, I need silence. It can't be like music or distractions, or at least focus. I have to reread everything I've written to get back into the groove. I'll often annoy people with how hard I try to ignore them so I can stay focused.

A: That's relatable. I come from a family of four children. I'm one of four, so I'm an expert at tuning people out. Sometimes I do at work, and people are like, Ashley, Ashley, I'm trying to have a conversation with you. Yeah, so I know what that is like. It's interesting that you listen to the music before, silence during your writing process, and then music after. Did the music that you listened to before inspire some of the song lyrics that were included in the book?

C: Yeah, so I listen to a lot of music, a lot of love songs in there. So I'm one of those people who will, if I like something, I'll try to recreate it. So, if I enjoy music, I want to make music. If I enjoy reading, I want to write a book, and so on. So, I don't know that I copied exactly the feel of the songs. It's more in the scene. I wanted lyrics that would match what's going on in the scene and sort of a way to tell the story. Well, telling the story, but in a way that I can come up with rhymes to make it more fun and creative. I actually had a lot of fun writing the lyrics to the songs in there.

A: And honestly, they were very fun to read. And it was just very neat to have Max and Nix interacting. And in the background, there's this music playing with these lyrics. I'm just like, listen to this, you two. Like you belong together. I just wanted to, you know, grab them and kind of shake them like, hey, listen, listen.

C: Yeah, I feel like a lot of readers would see it that way.

A: It was very cute, though. I did enjoy their chemistry and their interactions and how the plot moved along with their relationship. But I digress.

G: Yeah, there were so many times when I wanted to actually reach out and just hug Nix as I'm reading the book.

C: He probably could have used the hug.

G: Yeah, he's going through a lot. So, yeah. But that makes it exciting, though, what he's going through.

C: Yeah, and he's one of those people who, like a lot of us, he's not necessarily facing everything that he's feeling. He, you know, has all these intense emotions at the moment that he just has to let out. There's so much beneath the surface that he's trying to avoid, keep going because it's one thing after another. Or he just doesn't want to face them.

A: Yes, and I found that to be really relatable. I thought your character development, especially of Max and Nix, that was really well done. Because while I did want to, you know, shout at them sometimes, a lot of the times, you know, I could make connections between my own teen years. And, you know, what they were going through and feeling in the book, I always enjoy when, you know, it's an interesting plot, but also that I can connect to the characters that way.

G: So, speaking of songs and music, has Nix ever seen the rain or snow?

C: Has Nix ever seen the rain coming down on a sunny day? Yes, he has. But no, not outside of videos or movies. The first time he experienced this real snow was during the storm. After all he grew up in, I call it sunny San Jose. It's even often sunny when it rains. To keep the plants from withering,

it does rain. And he likes the rain because it keeps his hot skin cool. Plus, it's not like he can get sick, no matter how much he's out in the rain. But there's no storms and no lightning, unlike what happens when he's in Ember Crater, because it's peaceful. Even though most of the story takes place in Ember Crater, and that's where the magic is, I think I'd like living next to this fictional coastal hometown. Heck, that sounds like the perfect place to have the whole hashtag writer's life. Staring out at the sunlight, watching off the ocean, while you pretend to write the next great book, or really go down rabbit holes, searching for tiny details to your story. Details you won't even include in the book, right?

A: Oh, how the mind loves to wander. Especially if you have a word count goal for the day.

C: Yeah, I don't actually do word count goals. It's just the pressure is never until it happens. So just like if it happens, it's close.

A: Right. As it should be, I think. CJ, you talked a little bit about the internal struggles of Nix and all the things that he's going through throughout the story, with his parents, and his birth parents, and Max, and all this learning of having magic and things. There's a lot going on. And of course, he's the central character of the book. How else do you think readers will relate to Nix?

C: Nix is a hopeless romantic. I guess the expression should be hopeful romantic. Not that this is a love story, there's probably some of that in the reader too. It's a romance, right? I mean, there's Nix's search for more, and feeling weird, and awkward, and full of doubt. Forcing a fake smile on the outside. That's definitely relatable. And who hasn't had a crush, and either embarrassed themselves, or reveled in their feelings? Also, there's a moment in most of our lives when we start to question who we really are, and what we really want, just like Nix. Who you are as a kid, and who you are as an adult, changes a lot during those few years. And of course, everyone around you, you just have everything together. It's all confusing for them, where you're struggling, and you have to pretend like you're one of them. And you know you don't fit in, and nothing comes easily. So yeah, maybe the magic part isn't relatable, but the rest? It's just a walking emotional disaster that we all pretend not to be.

A: Oh, that is for sure. That hits home. And even with the magic, where he has put through all of those rigorous tests, and he uses his logic to pass the tests. Where he figures things out, but is doing it not as a lie, I guess you could say that. Where you're kind of fudging your way through, and then the realization hits. Like, oh wait, now I've made all these people believe I can do X, Y, Z. And now they're expecting me to do that thing, and I actually have no idea how. I feel like as a teen, I got myself into that situation a couple of times. Where you're seeking approval, and then you don't really think about it and the consequences until you get to that point.

C: Yeah, like, oh, well, you know how to do this, right? You know, you're just faking your way through life.

G: What was your favorite scene to write? I really liked the Halloween party chapter. Or maybe you don't want to say your favorite scene, because it would give away too much of the story.

C: Well, I mean, that's a hard one. You know, picking your favorite scene, when you wrote the book. I definitely enjoyed writing the Halloween chapter, because it got back all these emotional moments that I built up to in one chapter. And my favorite scene in that chapter is probably the time between them dancing. And then the scene with Nix in the rain, finally telling Max he cheated and letting it all out. Letting it out, of course, is meant to parallel what happens next. I also liked writing [inaudible] kissing. It felt like we'd built up forever to that moment. [inaudible] I also liked writing the dream sequences and the song lyrics, like I mentioned earlier. Because I got to play around with symbolism and write in different ways, and I felt free. [inaudible] My favorite scene still, were the sweet, flirty moments between Nix and Matt. There's a video call, they skate, and then it's raining. I had a lot of fun writing that scene in River's van. And they're like, [inaudible] the sun. It's just for you. [inaudible] for you, too. You know, we can totally hear you two.

A: Yeah, that was great.

C: Basically, any of those type of scenes, I enjoy them being sweet and a little funny. I love writing those.

A: I love those, too, because when you're in that kind of first love, puppy love, and you say those sweet things, you're zoned in on that person, like tunnel vision, without realizing, yeah, other people are in the room. That one made me chuckle.

G: So, Nix is enrolled in school. Can we talk a little bit about what the school environment's like?

C: Yeah, so, for most of the book, he's in Ember Crater High School, and it's this massive, like, building with [inaudible] towers, gargoyles on top. It's pretty intimidating.

G: Gargoyles.

C: Yeah, gargoyles.

G: I love the gargoyles.

C: So, you know, imagine, you know, you're standing out there, and you're just staring up at this tall tower, and, okay. And it makes this first impression, because the building feels like a maze, and there's some winding hallways, dead ends. And that's because the school used to be for magic students only, and was divided into, like, regular students. And it has secret passages all over for the magic students to enter the areas, just for them. It creates a divide, and a lot of resentment. Regular students are jealous of those that are in some mysterious advanced placement programs, because those special students get all this stuff just for them, like a whole mall food court, where the regular students just get a cafeteria. Then you have the magic students looking down on regular students as beneath them, and resenting that having regular students in school means that they have to hide their power. Nix finds himself caught between this divide, feeling like he's the one both groups would hate if they knew the truth. He also doesn't feel like he really belongs in either group. He's different from the regular students, who befriend on his first day. He's also different from the magic student, who he joins to be with Max. And as he goes through his magic classes, having [inaudible], all this lying makes him feel like he's becoming like the people he ran away from because they lied. If he came to find the truth, there'd be any truth left [inaudible].

A: Things get complicated for Nix very quickly, and I really felt for him that way. That feeling of having two social groups, two groups of potential friends, but not feeling like you really fit in either. That journey of self-discovery, I think, really helped him, by the end, find that he could fit in in both groups, and maybe they could have melded into one group, which was really nice to see. Obviously, that doesn't always happen in real life, but I found how that paired with the struggle with his parents he grew up with and his birth parents. There's a lot of connections, and just a lot going through Nix's mind and his life at that moment of the story. I really felt for Nix, I guess is all I'm trying to say. It felt very real, where the world comes crashing down on you as a teen, and having to figure that out and crawl your way out to who you are in the end.

C: It's difficult being, you feel like you're caught between two worlds, like your friends, your parents, different friends groups, or where do you belong, finding your place in the world. Something we all go through.

A: Yes, and it is tough. It is hard work.

G: I actually really enjoyed reading Nix's internal struggles, because most of the time, well, I can relate to him because of his internal struggles, when he falls or when he breaks some electronic piece

or something, and the awkwardness that he feels while doing that is just written so well that, like I said, I just kept wanting to reach out and put my arm around his shoulder and be like, Nix, it's okay, baby. He's also a go-getter. He's not just awkward and shy like teenagers, though, too. There's a side of Nix that has a really big heart, and I love that part of him also. Besides just being in love or hoping to find the love of his life, he also has a big heart for everybody else, too.

A: I found that really impressive. I was thinking while reading this, like, man, if I were in Nix's shoes, I would be so focused on just one thing, and yet here he is dealing with figuring out who his birth parents are, who his parents that he grew up with are. He's falling in love and working on getting a boyfriend, he started a new school, he learned he's magic, like, and so many things. And he's going through these things personally, but at the same time caring for the other people that he meets in his new town is just, like Goldie said, he has a big heart. And I feel like if he were a real person in my life in high school, I would have been like, wow, that's something to aspire to. Even though he feels like a train wreck on the inside sometimes, the fact that he has that capacity to look outward as well as inward, I feel like is impressive.

G: So what was the inspiration for *Gravity's Fire*?

C: Well, *Gravity's Fire* definitely wasn't inspired by any one thing. Like I was saying earlier, I'm one of those people who have to make something I enjoy, like music, want to make music, like action figures, I make action figures, video games, animation shows, et cetera. I try to make anything I like. So reading so many YA books made me need to write. And then there's something so freeing about writing your own story incorporating all the elements you love, humor, romance, fantasy, all in one book, and then taking out everything you don't really like. As far as content, I wanted to write about someone who has this magical belief [inaudible]. He's just clumsy and technology hates him, just like me. And it's like me, he finds out his parents are keeping secrets from lying to him. And he questions everything, including who he is. It feels different. Although he's kind of an alien. Who he is, I wanted to give him the acceptance, the caring and confidence that I lack. And when I did that, it changed Nix for me. And he became his own person. Nix gets to take risks that I never would have, like running away from home. And whereas I had no friends at that age, he has a best friend who's there to support him. So he's able to, you know, branch out and be braver than I was at his age. And from there on out, that story evolves. [inaudible] and so on. It's also exploring issues of identity and family in my favorite setting, which is the contemporary world with fantasy elements.

G: I absolutely love Lex, his best friend. And I am so glad that you gave him a best friend also, because my Lord, I don't know how anyone would go through all the stuff Nix does in the beginning without losing their mind unless they've got a best friend.

C: Yeah, I felt like I needed to give him a best friend. Also, because at his age, I wanted it. And I'm so like-minded [inaudible]. Plus, it balances them out. [inaudible] this sort of chaotic energy, you know, just sort of comes to him. She's all structured, order, you know, logical, problem-solving. He's the illogical problem-maker. So, you know, they balance each other out. Plus, she gets to be his connection to his past life while he's in the new town. But he doesn't completely lose that connection. And it helps tie a lot of the story together through her there.

A: I love the description that you used for Nix there, the logical problem-maker. But it is true. They balance each other out very well. And they, you know, play to each other's weaknesses and are able to support each other, which is just a very beautiful relationship that they have. And, yeah, I was also very glad that Nix had Lex. So it's interesting that you pulled a lot of inspiration from yourself in developing Nix. Were there any unexpected places or situations that you gained inspiration for *Gravity's Fire*?

C: I feel like most workplace situations I gain inspiration from are pretty common. You know, just making music or watching shows that kind of stuff. But one place that's sort of specific to this story is meeting my mom's biological family for the first time. It was after the woman that I thought of as my

grandma died. The woman who adopted and raised my mom and then raised me for my early childhood. And so it stands for meeting my, quote, real grandmother was surreal, that's just meeting people who look like me. But it made me realize how little I had actually defined family based on blood. And I tried to capture some of those feelings that both I and my mom went through at the time when writing Nix. Sort of discovering, oh, my parents aren't my real parents. I need to find my real parents. And, you know, meeting people who you feel like you should know, but they're still strangers to you. And this whole life opening up to you. I don't know if I'm explaining it well.

A: No, I think you explained that very well. And, you know, the idea of biological family and found family and, where he had his kind of found family to begin with and then was going to seek out his birth parents and had these expectations in mind, and then going through that, it felt tough. And I really felt for Nix and for his parents who raised him. But I felt like it was realistic when he found out that they weren't his birth parents. Like, if that was me as a teen, like, heck, yeah, I would run away and try to find my, quote-unquote, real parents. But thank you for being vulnerable and sharing that personal story and ties to Nix's situation.

C: Thank you. You're welcome.

G: I was going to ask a question about Max's mom, but I didn't really have one. I just wanted to put in there that Max's mom was funny because it just cracked me up, that's all. I don't want to give it away, but I do think those little nicknames are hilarious. That was just a very realistic part for me as a parent. Some people do call their kids by different names or nicknames or whatever. And it made it, for me, feel very realistic. And honestly, reading this book almost gives a feeling of, if you ever watched the show *Euphoria*, it makes you feel like you're just there and you're watching it happen with the teenagers. The same thing with this. I really enjoyed the writing. It was very smooth. It flowed. And I had such a good time reading it.

C: Thank you.

A: Lastly, CJ, could you tell us a little bit about the role magic plays in the story? I know we kind of hinted at it here and there, but could you explain it a little bit more in detail? Yeah, so there's actually two types of magic in *Gravity's Fire*. There's the elemental magic, like control over earth, water, air, and fire. And there's the magic that's used to mix and match. This magic of destiny, drawing them together and bonding them in seemingly impossible ways, like Nix's dreams or the sparks Nix touched. These two types of magic tie together to the two types of feelings Nix has during most of the book. Elemental magic is something that separates Nix from Max. It's what means they can't be together, he has to lie, cheat etc., to be with him. That's Nix's doubts and insecurities, keeping him and Max apart and leading to miscommunication. Then there's the magic between them. That's Nix's longing and desire, making him keep trying to be with Max. In essence, the physical gravity that keeps pulling him to Max is the emotional gravity, and the physical obstacle separating them is the emotional obstacle. That's the duality throughout the story, desire and doubt. In fact, that goes beyond the two types of magic. There being two types of students in the school, Nix's old hometown, a new birth town, him having two sets of parents, two sets of friends, lies versus truths, even Nix and Max themselves. It's all about this divide between two things, and in each case, the two worlds collide in the end.

A: Yeah, thank you. I found the magic system in the book, and the school, and all the little things that tie into it. And the larger things too, and the parallels were, one, really interesting and fun to find and connect while I was reading the book, but also just, yeah, very well thought out, and I think it really helps to tie everything together, because there is so much that Nix is going through in the book. Having this kind of all intertwined with the magic system, and the role of magic itself in the story, was something that I appreciated as a reader.

C: Yeah, I mean, if you think about it, Nix, it seems like it's like, oh, he doesn't believe in magic anymore, his magics are real, but if you think about it, he actually, from the very beginning, he does

believe in magic, because he believes in real faith, and soulmates, and destiny, and that is the part that helps him accept the elemental magic.

G: Yeah, you do feel magic between those two when they first meet. I mean, I thought there was something even more connecting them together with the magic out there, because it's almost like Nix is pulled towards Max.

C: Yes, gravity.

A: Okay, I said, finally, when I asked the last question, but I do just have one last quick question. After everything that we've talked about, and we've discussed the different themes and things, but, is there one thing that you hope readers to take away from your story, especially your young adult readers?

C: Well, when you're a teen, you're not a kid anymore, but you're not treated like an adult either. Much of your life is defined for you, it feels out of your control, like where you go, what you do, who you spend time with. That's [inaudible], to be someone else who has somewhere to belong, [inaudible], having best friends, and imagine someone liking you back. Okay, a lot of that, part of your life is figuring out where you are, where you belong and who you are, apart from other people deciding for you. It's confusing because everyone tries to put their own ideas of who you are and where you belong onto you. This is especially true [inaudible]. That's why found family is so important, because we get to define who our people are and where you belong. And for those of us who grew up [inaudible], finding your home and your people is so important to your sense of self and self-worth. We get to see not only Nix's feelings evolve about who he is and where he belongs, but also [inaudible] improves over the course of the story. Just being honest with yourself and others is so important, but also understanding that people will lie and keep secrets, and it's not always for the reasons we assume. After all, we all lie sometimes, and we have our reasons. I mean I kept my attractions a secret until I was an adult, and even lied about them [inaudible]. That doesn't diminish the value of the truth, it just means, that's my reason.

A: Yes. Yeah, I think you mentioned found family and the importance of that, and, growing up, that wasn't a theme that was often discussed in the Young Adult books that I often had access to. But I've noticed over the past few years, seeing more and more of that pop up, in adult books, but especially in Young Adult books, it makes me very happy to see that and knowing that teen readers are having access to these books and getting that comfort from them. So I'm very excited for people to get to read your book.

C: Thank you.

G: I'm very excited for people to get to read it too. I wouldn't be surprised if it goes to the top of the best seller list. I mean, I'm just saying, I loved it. I would go for a sequel. I would go for a short story on all the adventures that his bestie was doing while he was in Crater.

A: Yes!

[laughter]

A: I would've liked seeing—well now that you say that.

C: I know, it's all from Nix's perspective so we don't get what's going on, but there's all these hints of the different things that are happening in the background, that he doesn't know about. But because it's from his perspective, you know, you don't know what's happened, you just get the end point. I do know what happened to the other characters, it's just, he doesn't know it, so the reader is left to sort of speculate a little bit.

A: Oh, okay.

C: I was going to say, I do have a sequel in mind. I haven't started writing it, but I have planned out and know a lot of the [inaudible]. We'll see how this first book goes.

G: I will be first in line, I'm just letting you know. And anybody that I see just partially glance at this book, I'm going to be like, pick it up, read it, you're going to love it.

C: Thank you.

A: Before we wrap things up, is there anything that you want to promote other than your newly published book, or can you share where people can find you online?

C: Okay, so I finally made my social media handles the same across all platforms. It's @cjaralore all one word, and you can also find links to my short stories, as well as pre-order links to *Gravity's Fire* on the social link-tree, kind of my website, which is cjaralore.com.

A: Great! Well I think that wraps up our interview. Thank you Goldie. Thank you CJ, so much, for your time and for letting us both fan-girl a little bit over Nix and Max and everyone in *Gravity's Fire*. We really enjoyed this opportunity.

C: Well thank you for having me.



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