

Pet 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.



Samantha: Hi, welcome back to Reading the Rainbow. I'm Samantha, the Youth Services Coordinator for the Dauphin County Library System. My pronouns are she/her.

Dani: And I'm Dani. My pronouns are they them and I'm one of the library public service assistants.

S: I'm very excited for my first episode of Reading the Rainbow.

D: Welcome, welcome. This is a good book to start with.

S: Definitely, yeah. So we're talking about *Pet* by Akwaeke Emezi. Emezi is a Nigerian-born author who's non-binary and typically they write adult books such as *Freshwater*, but *Pet* is their YA debut. So that was cool to see an author kind of step out of their comfort zone and try something else.

D: Yeah, I bet that was really hard. Sometimes I feel like YA books, I do like YA books, but sometimes they feel, I don't want to say corny, but dimmed down.

S: Yeah! Yeah, no, I definitely wouldn't have gravitated towards this book on my own, but like, I'm so glad that I got the chance to read it.

D: Yeah.

S: Because yeah, YA can feel a little straightforward. There's less nuance than there is in the adult literature, but I thought they did a great job with the story. So yeah, Dani, why don't you start us off with what your thoughts were on the book?

D: I really want to start off with the name of the town. It's called Lucille and when I was reading it, I was thinking about, you know, Lucifer and sometimes he's called Lucy or I know there's also a female demon that sometimes people talk about just called Lucille and I found that interesting. Don't want to ramble too much about the Bible lore. What's your thoughts on that?

S: No, yeah, that's really interesting. I didn't catch that at first, right? So the city of Lucille, you know, according to the officials, the adults of the town, there are no more monsters than Lucille, right? So this idea that the angels have erased monsters, quote-unquote, from society, but you don't know what's underneath the surface, right? The whole point of the novel is that you can't always see monsters, you know? It's about what's unseen as the main character pet says over and over again. So to kind of see that connection to biblical themes, I think is a really good catch. Yeah, I like that a lot.

D: Yeah. And speaking of Pet, when he first stumbled out of the painting and Jam was like, Oh.

S: So calm. You know, this kid is coming from a world with no monsters. And as far as she can see, this could very well be a monster. You know, she doesn't know one way or the other, but she's so calm. Just like, Oh, hi. Okay, you're here now.

D: I would've been freaking out.

S: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. If I cut my hands on my mom's painting and a creature came out of it. Oh my gosh. Yeah, that's wild.

D: But Pet is kind of adorable. Kind of iconic.

S: Yeah.

D: For a monster.

S: Right, right. But also I found pet very intimidating. I listened to the audio book. And the narrator did a really good job with the voices. And Pet, you know, had this deep voice, "little girl," you know, "what do you see?" You know, it was it was very menacing, almost. But, you know, you know, Pet is there to hunt monsters. You know, he's there to do something good. But there's also like a lot of fuzzy lines between good and evil in this story.

D: Yeah.

S: I think.

D: Kind of like Deadpool.

S: Oh, yeah.

D: If I saw Deadpool walking around, I would be unnerved too.

S: Yeah.

D: Yeah. I also found it interesting how her recent paintings came to life in the second book. It dives into more of Bitter, Pet's mom. And she continuously has paintings being brought to life.

S: Yeah, I read about that online. I didn't— I haven't read *Bitter* yet. I'm intrigued to read it after reading Pet. You know, I'd love to see more of Bitter's adolescence because she and Aloe were great characters. But there is kind of a dilemma with Jam's parents in that they know that these creatures come out of the paintings to hunt monsters.

D: Mm-hmm.

S: They know Pet is there for a reason and they want to just shut the door on that. You know, so on the one hand, I adored Jam's parents. I just thought they were so cool, so accepting of her, so loving. But on the other hand, they kind of also turned a blind eye to what was right in front of them. And without spoiling anything, it feels like more damage could have been done if Jam did— I mean, it would have—more damage *would* have been done if Jam didn't go behind their back and stick with Pet and go hunt the monster.

D: Yeah.

S: You know what I mean?

D: I mean, from like a parent's point of view, I wouldn't want my child hanging out for monster too, even if it was for a good reason.

S: True. She's 16.

S: Yeah. [Laughter]

D: Why aren't you doing any homework in this book at all? [Laughter] Yeah.

S: Yeah, it's tricky. There's a lot of dilemmas in this book. There is no black and white. Everything's gray, you know? The lines between angel and monster, what's considered appropriate for a 16 year old, what isn't, you know, I don't know. I thought that was really interesting how there weren't any clearly defined lines. Yeah.

D: Speaking of the angels, was there any point in the book where they said what the angels look like?

S: Uh, not really. I feel like there wasn't a ton of world building in this book. Like there is, but it's very subtle. You know, you're kind of just thrown into it. And I interpreted the angels as human figures who might have worked with creatures like Pet during the revolution, but it's never really clearly laid out. You know, are these people, you know, in uniforms with titles, you know? The angels, are they more covert than that? Are they hidden figures? Right? I don't know. I don't know. Yeah. That was, that was definitely open to interpretation.

D: Yeah. I guess it goes back to like, to the hidden meaning that there is just angels and demons hidden among us.

S: Right.

D: Like we never really know.

S: Right. Yeah, absolutely. I agree with that.

D: Yeah.

S: Yeah. What I really loved about this book was the normalized representation of Jam, of Redemption's family. Uh, you know, so in this story, you're seeing a young black trans girl just living her life. You know, it's, it's part of her intersectionality, of her personality, of what makes Jam Jam, but it's not a controversy. It's just normal. Yes, at three years old, Jam said, I am a girl, and that was the end of it. That was the end of the conversation. And she got the care she needed and now she's 16 and she's a girl, you know, and I just love that. And even the, uh, neurodivergent representation in there, you know, Jam falls mute really often, but she uses sign language and everyone around her learned sign language. Even Redemption's family is able to communicate with her on her level. And I really appreciated that.

D: Yeah. It was really sweet seeing just a black trans girl being able to just simply survive.

S: Right.

D: It's harder for black trans folks to just be.

S: Exactly.

D: Yeah. Yeah.

S: Yeah. I found that really powerful because it erased the narrative of like tragedy. Yeah, this book is heavy and a lot goes on, but where there is tragedy, it doesn't have anything to do with jam's identity.

D: Yeah.

S: That's great for me.

D: I mean, in a way, I guess it does have to do with jam's identity with like the revolution and everything bad being taken care of there. So... I would have liked to see more of the revolution in this book or like—

S: I did too.

D: Yeah.

S: I really did too. I guess maybe that comes up in *Bitter* more.

D: Yeah, it does.

S: So it does kind of make you leave you wanting more, which, you know, that's just good writing. But I was finding myself very curious, like, what do Jam's parents know that Jam and Redemption don't know about before they were born, the time before they were born? Yeah, I found that really interesting as well.

D: I also love all their names in the book, Bitter, Redemption, Ube.

S: Yeah.

D: All very interesting.

S: Yeah. No, I enjoyed that as well. I think there's a lot of, I saw a lot of black culture seeped into the story in a very positive way. I just, I enjoyed that. I just enjoyed these characters so much. They were all so loving and accepting. And I felt at home with them.

D: Yeah.

S: You know?

D: Especially Ube, the librarian.

S: Oh, of course. Yeah, of course. Oh, "I'll show you what they don't teach you. That's what we do."

[laughter]

D: Banned book week is coming up.

[laughter]

S: It is! It is! Of which this is one of them.

D: Oh, it is?

S: I believe so. I think I saw that online, but I don't know where it was banned or challenged. But it did in my research that popped, I didn't dive into a real deeply, but that did pop up that this can be a controversial story. I mean, there are some trigger warnings, you know, it's a really fast-paced story. The ending is kind of where all those triggers come out. So I'm just gonna, gonna leave it at that, you know?

D: With it being a YA book, it's not too heavy. I mean, it is...

S: It is.

D: In comparison to if it was an adult book, it would go deeper into those themes.

S: Right, right. An adult novel would have had more nuance, themes, around these heavy topics. But, you know, I think Emezi did a good job of presenting these heavy themes in a way that teens can grasp it. It's real. It's not sugar-coated.

D: Yeah.

S: Definitely not sugar coated. You get to the end of this book, and you're like, Oh!

D: Yeah.

S: It's a little shocking, you know, there's some shock value to it. But at the same time, it stays with you.

D: Yeah.

S: It really makes you think it makes you analyze because this is supposed to be like a near future utopia. So it gets you thinking about the society we're in right now.

D: And I guess that also, not to get too deep, but brings up like what even is considered YA in today's culture with what teens are going through and everything. I'm sure they like see far worse out on the internet. And then this would not necessarily be a breath of fresh air, but something different, something to look forward to.

S: Yeah, yeah, absolutely. There's definitely a lot of hope at the end of it. You know, it's interesting to compare Jam and Redemption to today's teens. So one of the things I read that people were saying about this book is that they thought Jam read too young, younger than 16. And my first thought was, well, if you're raised in a society where everyone tells you there are no monsters—

D: Yeah.

S: —that's gonna lead to some naive teenagers, you know, or at least to teenagers who can hold on to their innocence longer.

D: Yeah.

S: Right? You know, pet comes in and kind of shatters that innocence and we see growth in Jam, just throughout these 200 pages. But yeah, today's teens, they see it all.

D: Yeah.

S: They see it all online. They see it all in school. You know, there's no escaping it, right? So I could definitely see how 16-year-olds now would come across as older than jam came across in the story, right? So that was just something I read and I was like, I don't really agree with that.

D: Yeah.

S: I think she reads exactly as she would—

D: Yeah.

S: —if this society was real.

D: And I wonder if her neurodivergent also plays a part in that.

S: Right!

D: I would like to hear a teen's point of view of autism or ADHD on their take about Jam.

S: Yeah, absolutely. I'm one of those people who is diagnosed with neurodivergence as an adult.

D: Yeah, same.

S: Right? So I would love to hear from a teen who's more aware of how their mind works and can relate to Jam a little more closely. That would be really cool. Yeah. Like if I was doing like a teen book club, this would be great.

D: Yeah.

S: Yeah. There's so much to get into with it.

D: I wonder if there's any blog posts or any Goodreads posts about like teens points of view about the book.

S: Yeah. Most of what I was reading, it appeared to be adults.

D: Yeah.

S: You know, and there were very mixed reviews. You know, some people were like, it was amazing. Some people were like, parts I like parts I didn't like. There wasn't one reception to this book that kind of resonated across all the reviews I read. It was really up and down.

D: Yeah.

S: And it kind of forced me to stop and like, what do I really think about this book? And I'm like, no, it's good.

D: Yeah.

S: It's pretty good.

D: I think it's on my favorites on Goodreads right now.

S: Oh, yeah?

[laughter]

S: But I'm a librarian. I want to know what—

D: Everybody's points of view.

S: Exactly. Yeah, totally.

D: Yeah.

S: It's fast-paced. Almost rushed at times, I think, like the ending. And so much was packed into those last couple chapters. But to give any of it away kind of gives all of it away.

D: Yeah. And it was only around like 200 pages, or something like that.

S: It's a quick book.

D: Yeah.

S: Yeah. I think I listened to it in like, I think it was like six hours. The audiobook. Really a quick read. So yeah, if you're looking for a quick read, that sort of questions, what's good? What's evil? What defines an angel? What defines a monster? And you want to get into those kind of existential questions.

D: Yeah.

S: This is a great book for that while being accessible to most readers.

D: Yeah.

S: Yeah.

D: And I guess with that, oh, what's good and what's evil? Not to bring up other books. But you know, Dante's whole purgatory and inferno and all that. I guess there could be themes of that in this book when you think about it.

S: Definitely.

D: Yeah.

S: Definitely.

D: If you want to go deeper into the whole, questioning everything.

S: Right. Well, yeah, I mean, hmm. Yeah, we could go down a rabbit hole with that and just give away the whole story, so...

D: Yeah.

S: But I see what you mean. Definitely. Yeah.

D: Oh, the food, the descriptions of the food. That was great. Whenever I see food in any book, though, I'm like, oh man.

S: Yeah, yeah, it was... I think that lends it to some of that comfort I felt.

D: Yeah.

S: With these families. Yeah. Anytime there's. People gathering to break bread, you know, that's a beautiful moment. Yeah. Jam's family and Redemption's family really emulated that.

D: And I guess I could tie into today's world like, how you have families grouping together during trying times, especially black families like.

S: Yeah.

D: Yeah.

S: Yeah. Tell me more about that.

D: You have like gang violence going on and Black Lives Matter, stuff like that. But you still get together and have fun like cookouts and everything to get away from all of that.

S: Right. It's about living and loving and persevering and existing happily.

D: Yeah.

S: No matter what. Coming together and yeah, surviving. And yeah, that's beautiful.

D: Yeah. No, thinking deeper about the book. Yeah.

S: Oh, I know. 200 pages there's so much to dig into. There are so many themes that come out of this. You could talk for a while about this book.

D: And she was from— what country in Africa was—

S: The author? Nigeria.

D: Oh, yeah. I love seeing, like, queer representation from Africa.

S: Right?

D: Because I was reading some books and I was like, there really isn't that much queer representation or queer fiction from Africa.

S: No. I, yeah, I mean, there's stigma everywhere, but I feel like it's often really pronounced in media from other countries. Yeah, no, it's just, yeah, a breath of fresh air to see Emezi successful and, I don't know, I want to say fighting the good fight. It's not really a fight in this book. There is, but it's not about queer identities.

D: Yeah.

S: Anyone queer in this book gets to just be, and that's a beautiful thing.

D: A wholesome yet dark read, yeah.

S: It is.

D: Yeah.

S: The end is dark. I will leave it at that. But there are so many wholesome moments throughout the story.

D: And I guess that really tunes into what horror is. Because everybody thinks it's just guts spilling out and everything. But when you watch horror movies or read horror books, you see really profound themes like this that really makes you think. Like Jordan Peele's *Us*.

S: Yeah, I didn't see that. Because I don't really watch horror much. I'm a scary cat. I was like, that looks scary. I can't deal with it. But for a book that took me out of my comfort zone, I was really glad I read this one.

D: Please check it out everybody.

S: Yes, come to the Dauphin County Library System and check out *Pet* because it is good.



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