

[Intro music]

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've been reading.

[Music]

Jamie: Hi! I'm Jamie, I use she/her pronouns.

Amber: Hi, I'm Amber, I also use she/her pronouns.

Jamie: And today, we're going to be talking about Don't Want You Like a Best Friend by Emma R. Alban. So it is a historical fiction set in the early Victorian period where two young women, I think they're like 19ish, 20ish, are making their debut in society and they are having all these lavish parties; the two different characters we have, our two leads, are Gwen, who has a rakish father who is also trying to get through the Matrimonial Causes Act and our other heroine is Beth, who, this is her first time out in society, and her mom is really trying to get her to find a good match because they are on thin ice financially because her father had just died and his estate is entailed away to a cousin, and they pretty much have nothing after this, so those are the stresses on them. And Gwen had already been out for I think like, three seasons at this point? Or four? [Amber: Mhm] And she has absolutely no interest in finding a match. She is just doing this because it's expected of her.

Amber: And lucky for her, her dad is very wealthy and would not make her marry if she didn't want to. So it works out.

Jamie: It really does! So, at the first dance, Gwen saves Beth from a-

Amber: An uncomfortable-

Jamie: An uncomfortable situation.

Amber: So once they meet each other, they are drawn to one another and they want to spend all their time with each other instead of trying to find a husband. They come up with an amazing scheme, because they hear that their parents used to be friends, so that if they don't have to get married, their parents can get married, and then they don't have to worry about finances and they can stay together all the time.

Jamie: So the novel is both inspired by Taylor Swift's song, and if you look at it on end, a little bit like The Parent Trap.

Amber: Yeah a little bit like The Parent Trap! Except for they're- [laughter] they're really bad at it.

Jamie: Oh yes, these two heroines are incredibly bad at plotting.

Amber: They really do try; everything they do backfires. I think my favorite one is, there's a cricket match, and they get their parents to be partners, and Beth's mom hits Gwen's dad in the crotch.

Jamie: Unintentionally.

Amber: Yeah, it was not an intentional move but he is understandably upset. [laughter]

Jamie: But, with all of this, they don't necessarily realize that the feelings they are developing for one another are on the more romantic side, until Gwen sees the housekeeper and the cook? [Amber: Mhm] two of the servants who work for her father's household together, and then she realizes that like, that even is a possibility.

Amber: Yeah! Because we know now that only wanting to spend time with your girl best friend and absolutely no one else, and being more interested in her than in potential suitors is like, a little bit fruity. But in her defense, most queer people I know did not realize they were queer until their twenties, so, relatable.

Jamie: It is! And while it's true that people can be very close friends platonically, Gwen and Beth realize that their feelings are not so platonic, [Amber: Yeah, yeah!] that they want to kiss.

Amber: Mhm mhm. And that's just not something you want to do with your platonic BFF

Jamie: And so they then try to use their horrible plotting to get more time alone together, and their friends, bless them, realize what they are trying to do and help them come up with much more plausible plotting.

Amber: Yeah, they do not give their friends nearly enough credit. [Jamie: Noooooo] They think they're being so subtle this whole time, I just, yeah. They're not. Their friends are a whole lot better at scheming than they are.

Jamie: Mhm. And so, because we didn't mention this before, the whole vibe of this series, because it's the first in a series, the next one I think was published last month, so August of 2024 at this point, and that focuses on like a different pair. It is very much like frothy Bridgerton fun, just queer.

Amber: Exactly, that is exactly what it is. It is a historical novel but written with a very clear modern perspective and language. [Jamie: Mhm] um so if that is a problem for you then this is maybe not the book you want to read. But for me that can be an issue, I've read books where it really bothers me, but this one just by the nature of the type of story it is I think it works okay. And it's just fun, it's just a fun book.

Jamie: So one thing the author did put a lot of research into was the clothing.

Amber: Yes, so, historic clothing; I think it's pretty widely known that women's clothing historically has been a lot more complicated, and in this particular setting you have early Victorian, which includes many many layers. So one of the scenes that I found slightly unrealistic is that Gwen and Beth wanted some time together and they only had about twenty minutes, and they had some spicy times, and I just want to declare that that is not possible, [laughter] um-

Jamie: Because we were led to believe that they were undressed, had relations, and then re-dressed and were presentable for society again.

Amber: Yes, and like, for context, these are people who have had people dress them their whole lives. I work part time at the Pennsylvania Renaissance Faire, and I have a dress that has a corset and a bodice, I need people to help me dress. And the minimum amount of time it takes to get dressed is like 40 minutes. Now, I'm not doing it every day, so probably people who do this on a more regular basis are a little bit faster, but there are a lot of layers. Getting in and out in twenty minutes without any spicy times in between is just, it seems wildly unrealistic. I just-

Jamie: And it's one of those pass the hand over type things that like, nothing to see here, so we understand that it's not necessarily reality as we know it.

Amber: I also want to say that like, even if they didn't get fully undressed, the mobility you have in a corset is really low. Your spine is straight, and that is all. You cannot move. It looks so pretty and the dress I wear is so pretty, and I would do so many things to wear this dress all the time, but being able to maneuver like we're used to is just not an option. Any kind of reaching under the dress is not happening, there's too many layers of fabric, and you cannot twist at all or bend. So [laughter] maybe more detail than you need, but like, just doing any kind of intimate anything in the dress takes some time, that's all.

Jamie: The other thing the author put a lot of research into was setting this during the time period of the passage of the Matrimonial Causes Act [Amber: Yes] because that was a huge plot point too between Beth's mother, who had been abused by Beth's father who had passed away, and Gwen's father who might have been slightly inspired to do this because of the situation with Beth's mom, but anyways that has a lot of friction socially among the aristocrats that were seeing, including the father of Beth's potential... they get very serious very quickly. [Amber: Mhm] I don't want to say boyfriend because that's not the right word. [Amber: Suitor] There we go! [laughter]

Amber: But yes, the Matrimonial Causes Act would let women divorce their husbands if there was like abuse or they had a viable excuse to get out of that marriage then they could do that by their own will rather than being at the whims of the men, who in these instances were the people controlling them. So one of the things that this book talks about a lot beca- it includes the Matrimonial Causes Act, it is the driving force for Beth needing to find a husband is that women just didn't have the same kind of, what's the word I want, [Jamie: Opportunities?] Opportunities, they did not necessarily have control of their own... [Jamie: Autonomy?] Autonomy, thank you, autonomy. [Laughter] So they had to work around these laws that existed and around these men in their lives and just kind of hope that the ones that had anything to do with them were going to be like considerate. So that's, that's why Beth's mom married Beth's dad and that's why Beth feels like she needs to find a match even if it's somebody that she doesn't love. Because they feel like they don't have another option.

Jamie: I remember Beth does indulge in some fantasies of running away with Gwen to Paris and becoming like, typists or something that could just live in a boarding house, things that she knows realistically she would not be doing because it would leave her mom in a really uncomfortable situation, but yeah she, she fantasizes about more autonomy [Amber: Yes] but it's very difficult for girls in their position.

Amber: Yeah, so we mentioned earlier that the housekeeper and the cook in Gwen's household is what sort of clued her into the fact that she might be into Beth a little more than in a friendly way, and it's really interesting to look at how they're able to do that because they are, you know, you have the upstairs downstairs, they're downstairs and people aren't monitoring them as closely, they are not under the same kind of... [Jamie: Scrutiny?] Scrutiny, yeah, so I think that's a part of why they have that fantasy of they can go and they can be like working class! But obviously that's not an option for them. So even though working class people obviously had a lot of other things they really had to worry about, the way that at least these two characters were able to maneuver their future to be together was interesting to see.

Jamie: It was. It also makes me think about, there were some queer, like, people higher in society. So there was an out archduke in Austria, I forget his name, [Amber: Oh yeah yeah] but he was very adamant that he would not be set up with any woman just because he was very obvious that he preferred men [laughter]. And then there was a princess Isabella of Parma [Amber: Oh yeah yeah yeah!] I might've gotten that wrong, but she was also in love with her brother's wife, and she returned her affections briefly, but she was not terribly consistent about it so. [Amber: Mhm] Poor Isabella. And then there's also, more related to our fictional pairing of Beth and Gwen, were two women from Ireland, I think they were called the Ladies of Llangollen [Amber: Yeah!] I think they ended up moving to Wales, but one of them was like an aristocrat and she found, became friends, and then that developed more, with somebody else in the area

and then they openly lived together in their little estate and they were visited by other queer people of note during that time like Oscar Wilde, and then Anne Lister of Gentleman Jack fame, and they were actually the inspiration for Anne Lister to do like an unofficial wedding with her lover at that time. So. Anyways, yeah.

Amber: Lots of queer people! So like, there were ways. I think it probably just took a lot of guts, first of all [laughter] a lot of maneuvering in society to make it a possibility, or just being in a secure enough position that you didn't care. [Jamie: Mhm] Which, for some people they were able to do that, and some people, it was a little bit more precarious. But like, James the first of England was also very gay, he had a boyfriend who he kept promoting, and the reason we have the King James bible is because his advisors were complaining about the boyfriend, and he was like no, um, go translate a bible and don't bother me. [laughter]

Jamie: Anyways, so, there was a little bit of queer representation at the time, but then also the early Victorian period and the late Victorian period I'm sure as you guys remember, like one of the things its most famous for was the morals, and like especially the family morals, and so even then for heterosexual couples they often slept separately, they didn't have many relations with each other, men visited brothels.

Amber: The Victorian era was wild, it was-

Jamie: It really was.

Amber: They created all of these, what we think of as like gender norms and norms for how people interact with each other that I think people take for granted as just being like how its always been today, and like they- it's not, it was a really weird phenomenon and I don't know what sparked it, it was probably, like most historical trends, like a reactionary thing but yeah no Victorians were weird.

Jamie: I thought it mostly happened after Alfred died, it was Victoria alone and, because like [Amber: Possibly] when they were together they had relations very frequently, like she was like, open about how much she loved her husband.

Amber: Yeah, I think, I don't know if it's an unfortunate, in some cases unfortunate trend of society that's when you swing far enough one way, it bent- like it will swing back the other way, and I suspect that that is partially to blame for Victorian morals. I read a book once, it's called City of Dreadful Delight, and it's about essentially the sensation-alization of like Jack the Ripper and these very sexualized events in Victorian England and, part of the reason why people were so invested in them was because they were so taboo. Like obviously murder is taboo, but like, the fact that they were prostitutes is why people were so invested in it. And I think honestly, to

some point it's still today, but those types of, of societal structures I think make taboo things more interesting to people.

Jamie: Mhm. Yeah. The allure of the forbidden.

Amber: Yes. And luckily we did have things like the Matrimonial Causes Act which allowed for a little bit more freedom for women at that time.

Jamie: Yes, so, spoiler alert, it does pass, in history and in the book. [Laughter] part of the reason why Gwen's father and Beth's mother were so, kind of at loggerheads for a good portion of the book, was the fathers, was Gwen's father's promotion, and I think he's the one like maybe in the book is the main supporter of the Matrimonial Causes Act and then Beth's mother really just doesn't want that to have anything to do with Gwen or her family just because of the father's reputation.

Amber: Yeah. When Beth has a suitor and is introduced to the family it becomes very evident that the father of her suitor is very against the Matrimonial Causes Act, so it's not that Beth's mother disagrees with it, she just knows that it is a very divisive issue and that it will limit Beth's ability to find a match. I will give her though that when it really comes to it, Beth's mom does support her daughter. The scenario in the book makes it so Beth's mom could be a villain, but she's shown to very much have Beth's best interests at heart, even to the detriment of her own sometimes.

Jamie: Yeah, because rather than want Beth to make this financially advantageous match, she recognizes that she might be pushing Beth into a situation not completely unlike the one that she had been in with Beth's father. And rather than that she wants Beth's happiness. [Amber: Mhm] Which, because it is a romance that we are covering on here, you can be assured that they do get-

Amber: Yes, I don't think that that's really a spoiler, just based on the type of book it is [laughter] it's very fluffy and nice, like queerness could've been a very emotionally traumatic story [laughter] but luckily Gwen and Beth's friends in the story are very accepting of them and are even often helping them find time together and, even though queer people have been throughout history and some of them have been very famous, that is, is never guaranteed. So it was really nice to have this lovely little escapist romance where you kind of knew that they were going to have a happy ending, even if historically they might not have.

Jamie: Yeah, all their friends, all their family, are just very supportive so. You don't have to worry about having any coming out trauma here, you might be a little jealous to how supportive everyone was

Amber: Right?

Jamie: But that's the, the allure of the romances.

Amber: I do, in addition to being relatable in the way of not realizing you're gay for a long time, literally all of their friends being like... we know, like [laughter] thanks for telling us I guess. But also-

Jamie: You weren't hiding it, [Amber: No] you just were in your own closet.

Amber: Yeah. The number of times I came out to friends where they were just like, wha- my one friend legitimately said I thought we knew and just weren't talking about it. [Laughter] Yeah. But yes, overall it's a very nice book.

Jamie: It is.

Amber: And the second book, like we said earlier, just came out, it's called You're the Problem, It's You, so another Taylor Swift lyric. I just started it, so I can't say much past that it seems like it's going to shape up to, seem like it's going to be a very pleasant little read.

Jamie: Wait it's two, um, gay male leads instead? [Amber: Yes] And I think each of them are the cousins of Gwen and Beth.

Amber: So possible future for them, not living in their parents' house.

Jamie: Yes, that is the way that it ends up, where it has like the two of them sharing a bedroom.

Amber: Yeah.

Jamie: For their situation it is much better than it could have been.

Amber: You know, usually the whole step sibling thing gives me the ick but like in this scenario it works out.

Jamie: Yes, they meet each other as adults, young adults, but still. Instead of like being raised together that would just be ooooo.

Amber: Would be weird. But yeah, they, they literally just met.

Jamie: Yes, yes. And it just happened to be that their parents both had, as we find out, like a history together.

Amber: Yeah. If you like a queer romance and especially if you're into the media like Bridgerton, I think this is probably a book that you'd enjoy.

[Outro music]

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