

[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]

Dani: Hello, this is Dani, and my pronouns are they/them.

Royal: Hello, I'm Royal, my pronouns are also they/them.

Dani: And today we'll be reviewing *Sleeping Among Wolves* by author Royal Poff, who is here today.

Royal: Hello!

Dani: [Laughter] So, tell us about yourself.

Royal: So, my name is Royal Poff, I've been an author for about three years now, published... five books? And I'm a photographer as well. And that's me.

Dani: Getting into the book description and everything: How far would you go to save the one you love? Six months after a devastating infection collapses society as they knew it, Atlas and Moose barely survive an attack on the base they had been living in. Stranded and alone, with Atlas battling the deadly infection, a sketchy radio transmission speaks of a safe zone somewhere in Pennsylvania. Atlas makes it his mission to get Moose there safely. What begins as a hunt for safety and freedom, turns into a deadly race against time, as they soon learn that the world has been hiding something far more sinister than the cannibalizing disease that is swiftly eradicating mankind.

Dani: And *Sleeping Among Wolves* has scenes of mental illness, transphobia, and gore, for content warnings. What made you want to write the book?

Royal: So I started writing the book in a very like, emotional period for me; I was dealing with a lot of heavy loss at the time and I wanted to write a love story to kind of counteract that. But it's not a typical love story because it's very dark, it's verry horror-centric still, but it's very much an embodiment of how I was feeling.

Dani: Yeah, I feel like people don't recognize that a lot of horror... it's a way to like deal with grief and other things that are going on. It's not just like, blood and gore and all that, there's a lot of different themes that help people in horror, do you agree?

Royal: Yep! [Laughter]

Dani: Alrighty, and where did you like, draw inspiration for the read, besides it being like, York Pennsylvania.

Royal: So inspiration for the book came from a lot of different places, one was a Kanye lyric, I know we've talked about that before. It's such a random spot to get inspiration from, but his song "I Thought About Killing You," which is a very, like, in-depth look into mental illness and like what lengths you go through for love and it, it just struck a chord with me. I thought it was a very weird, off kilter, way of describing love and I wanted to write a story that was about cannibalizing a lover.

Dani: Interesting, you hear that Kanye West? Please give us money. [Laughter] So when you're talking about like mental illness, do you think there's a correlation between mental illness and like zombie outbreaks?

Royal: I think that there's always been like a, connection of like otherness to zombies, they look like people but they aren't people, and that's always been like a stigma that's been centered around the zombie outbreak. And sometimes when, like, you're mentally ill, you feel- you feel that ostracization, you feel that like separation from your peers that I think comes into play with the zombie genre.

Dani: And do you think, like, transphobia ties into that? Being ostracized?

Royal: I think, yeah.

Dani: Did you read any books following up to draw inspiration for that? Or just the Kanye lyrics? [Laughter]

Royal: Yeah, um, there's other stories leading up to that. [laughter] Obviously The Walking Dead, the big one, everybody loves The Walking Dead, its THE zombie story. No?

Dani: No.

Royal: That's fair. Everybody loves early Walking Dead.

Dani: Right, like it became terrible.

Royal: Yeah... we don't talk about later Walking Dead. But, um, another inspiration was The Battery, which is a movie, it's about two guys, they're not romantically involved but it's a similar situation where its two guys trying to survive, and it's a very like low key story about them just like getting through life in an apocalypse. [Dani: mhm] And their relationship as two friends that became like each other's worlds, almost, because they're the only people that they have.

Dani: Yeah. Now that we're like talking about the romance aspect, well, earlier, do you think it better characterizes with like dark romantasy instead of horror?

Royal: I'm terrible with genres honestly. I could see dark romantasy; I definitely think there's like a cross between horror and dark romantasy that it could envelop, which I don't know if that's a genre in itself, but.

Dani: It is, yeah. [Laughter] All the TikTok girlies are talking about it.

Royal: There we go!

Dani: Do not get your recommendations from TikTok though. And like, what are some common themes you see throughout the book besides transphobia and zombies, metal illness, is there anything else that you want to touch on?

Royal: So there's a lot of common themes of how far would you go for love. I feel like I always start my stories with a theme, and then I branch off from there with how I want to tell it. And that was the main focus of the story, was how far somebody would be willing to go for their lover, how um, much would they destroy themselves and how much would they be destroyed upon loving someone.

Dani: Mhm. And this doesn't correlate to that at all [laughter] but it is like set in like, around York, right?

Royal: Yeah.

Dani: And I think York is pretty haunted, right? [Laughter] Did that influence anything?

Royal: Not really, honestly I set it in York because it's a familiar area to me. It's honestly like, I know the area, I know like, there is the abandoned aspect of it; there's a lot of abandon-ness to York that I think had a good set dressing for it.

Dani: Yeah. 'Cause I'm thinking like, depending on how many times I got lost in York [laughter] I think that I could definitely see a zombie apocalypse happening in like, the cornfields or whatever surrounding York. And I really liked the book, not because the author signed my book, but because I liked the book. [laughter] I'm not a big like romance person, but when it's intertwined with some other storyline then I think I do like it, and it was done really well.

Royal: Thank you, thank you.

Dani: Do you have like any upcoming projects? Are you branching out on that story, making a... sequel perhaps? [Laughter]

Royal: So I have conceptualized a sequel, that's as far as I've gotten with that project so far is conceptualization. It would follow the events of the story, in the future obviously quite a ways, without like getting into any spoilers for *Sleeping Among Wolves*. It would be, it would be divisive to say the least. Uh, which is why I haven't fully dived into it yet. But my current project

is *They Use the Eyes That See*, which is an anthology that I'm running with twelve other authors where each author writes a separate chapter and then that author carries on into the next author who writes the continuous chapter. [Dani: Mhm] It's taking years off my life, it's a horrendous undertaking but I love all my authors and they are making it so worth it.

Dani: Yeah, that seems pretty creepy, so. And like the title, where did that inspiration come from? Because if I remember correctly there wasn't really any wolves, so.

Royal: So it's-- yeah, *Sleeping Among Wolves*, so it's a, the title is namedropped by one of the characters. It's basically like saying that it's, Moose's side of the story, where Moose is among a wolf; he's among a friend but someone that could kill him. [Long pause] And Moose is the one that's kind of among the wolves.

Dani: I like how we saw Atlas deteriorating into madness and like, giving him that emotion. I feel like in a lot of media, zombies are just portrayed as mindless and out to eat blood, but you could see the constant battle in his head going on, as if he should kill Moose, or not.

Royal: Yeah, so I'm, I didn't want the typical zombie; I didn't want like the brainless shambling corpse. The zombies in my story, quote unquote zombies, they're never like official zombies, but in my story, they still have some life to them. They've basically been boiled down to their animalistic needs but they still have a consciousness, they still feel pain, they still know what they're doing, and there's scenes where like people who have just turned are apologizing for their actions because they are just so ravenous that they can't control themselves. [Dani: Yeah] And I think a lot of that was inspired by like, the want for them to have more of an emotional core to them.

Dani: Mhm. So when you're talking about them still having a consciousness or whatever, do you think that relates back to mental illness? Because I know bipolar or borderline personality disorder sometimes you lash out on people, and you process it after the fact and apologize to people, do you think that correlates to mental illness like that?

Royal: Yeah, um, I, obviously you know I have borderline personality disorder and I wrote a lot of my own struggles into the story itself, and I think it's a physical metaphor for like the exactly what you're describing, stuff like that, just shoved into the body of a zombie, basically.

Dani: That's interesting, that's interesting. Do you have anything else you want to say, any current books you're reading; how's your spooky season?

Royal: Um, I'm reading *Enemy of my Enemy* by Mary Sangiovanni. I'm very slowly getting through it- it's taking me a while because I have other projects I'm working on and stuff, but I love Mary Sangiovanni she's an incredible author, and *Enemy of my Enemy* is an Alien franchise book, and it's like official canon and everything, it's really cool.

Dani: Nice, I'll have to check it out, you have to remind me. [Laughter]

Royal: Alright.

Dani: That wraps up our discussion for *Sleeping Among Wolves* by Royal Poff. Join us next episode where we discuss another book available in our collection here at DCLS.

[Outro music]

Dani: This has been *Reading the Rainbow*, a 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've piqued your interest in this episode's selection, consider borrowing it from your local library. Thanks so much for listening!

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