

[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, and I also use she/her pronouns. Today we're going to be talking about the book *Song of the Huntress* by Lucy Holland. Lucy Holland is an author of multiple well-received fantasy and historical fantasy novels, some published under the name Lucy Hounsom. She worked 12 years in corporate accounts for Waterstone Booksellers before becoming a full-time author. Lucy cohosts the intersectional feminist podcast "Breaking the Glass Slipper," which combines her passion for elevating the voices of women and marginalized creators with a love of speculative fiction. Lucy lives in Devon with a black cat and a bedroom full of books. The history and landscape of the UK West country is very much a part of her writing.

Amber: So, *Song of the Huntress*. *Song of the Huntress* transforms the story of Herla and the Wild Hunt into a rich feminist fantasy and a tale of two great warriors, a war-torn land, and a great magic that is slowly awakening. It's set in AD 60 in Britain. Hoping to save her lover, her land, and her people from the Romans, Herla makes a desperate pact with the king of the Otherworld. But years pass unheeded in his realm, and she escapes to find everyone she loved long dead. Cursed to wield his blade, she becomes Lord of the Hunt. And for centuries, she rides, leading her immortal warriors and reaping wanderers' souls. Until the night she meets a woman on a bloody battlefield—a Saxon queen with ice-blue eyes. Queen Æthelburg of Wessex is a proven fighter. But when she leads her forces to disaster in battle, her husband's court turns against her. Yet King Ine needs Æthel more than ever. Something dark and dangerous is at work in the Wessex court. His own brother seeks to usurp him. And their only hope is the magic in Ine's bloodline that's lain dormant since ancient days. The moment she and Æthel meet, Herla knows it's no coincidence. The dead kings are waking. The Otherworld seeks to rise, to bring the people of Britain under its dominion. And as Herla and Æthel grow closer, Herla must find her humanity—and a way to break the curse—before it's too late.

Jamie: I feel like I need to give this very important update. Throughout I was picturing Lucy Lawless as Xena as Herla.

Amber: Oh my goodness. I wasn't, but I love that.

Jamie: Yeah, because she's described as having like dark brown, um, braids, and yes- [Amber: Yeah!] And I can just kind of see her go in with a whole kind of war cry.

Amber: Yes. In my brain Æthel had like the Viking braids. Just recently we had- we had Viking Week in the Faire so it's very fresh in my mind. [Laughter]

Jamie: I really was interested in the inclusion of Welsh mythology in this. And Amber, you have an Irish history background. [Amber: Yeah!] which obviously has a little bit of overlap maybe with the Celtic mythology.

Amber: Yes, okay, so I thought that was super interesting. My area of history is more like early modern, but I just think Celtic myth and legend is the coolest thing. I think it seems to me to be mostly based in the West country where the author apparently lives, and the only indication I had for that is, I think there's a, a map? In the book? And also one of the locations they mention, they call it Tintagel in the book, but Tintagel is the historic seat of Arthur of, Arthurian legend. [Laughter] And that is a real place, that is in Cornwall.

Jamie: I was really interested with this, that they had like the mythological figure of Constantine [Amber: Yes!] for that and I was wondering, is the author like replacing Constantine... like was she using Constantine as an Arthurian figure?

Amber: Maybe! The way that they referred to Constantine did feel very Arthurian, yeah.

Jamie: That he'd like, come back when his people needed him.

Amber: Yeah, it was very interesting the way that they just slightly changed certain things that are like, familiar in Arthurian legend for us now, but in all honestly I don't know their original pronunciation or like any of the exact details of the original Arthur. I did, a couple of years ago, do like a Great Courses on Arthurian legend, and I think Constantine might've been one of the people they thought that Arthur was based off of.

Jamie: Fascinating.

Amber: Yeah! Similar, I mean in relation to Arthur, the character Emrys also is Merlin in most modern Arthurian legend.

Jamie: This makes so much sense. He's just supposed to be like this, just mysterious figure that just comes and goes at his own whim, gives a little bit of information but not too much, and of course the name similarity. I did not catch that though until you said that.

Amber: Mhm. Thank you BBC Merlin because I would not know that information. [Laughter] But yeah, in addition to the, the Welsh history, there are actual like, real people who are mentioned. I mean, Arthur may or may not have been a real person. But Boudicca, who the character of Herla originally was fighting for, is a very well-known historical warrior who fought against Rome then.

Jamie: And they seem to keep most of her same backstory. [Amber: They do.] She had the two daughters who were raped by Romans, and that was what stirred her to unite everybody and-

Amber: Yeah, and she had a lot of loyal female followers as well, which is Herla's backstory, basically. And then also, Æthelberg and Ine were actually real people, I looked them up and they lived in the sixth and seventh hundreds. There's the scene at the very beginning of the book where she burns down a fortress that her husband had built, and that was a real event that happened, and they also did not ever have an heir. So the little bits of history were a very clear influence for this book.

Jamie: And as somebody who does not have a background in the history of the British isles, I was very convinced by all of it. Like I wasn't sure how much the author had pulled from history and how much she had, um, embroidered with her story. [Amber: Yeah] So that was, that was really-

Amber: I also think the elements, so like the, obviously the reason we're talking about it in this podcast is because there were queer elements to it, and I was extremely impressed by the way that they were woven into the story, because obviously queer people have existed forever, but often in modern literature, when queerness is superimposed on a historical er- like time period, it's really obvious, if that makes sense. Like modern terminology is used in a setting where it wouldn't have been, and so the way that certain queer characters or certain queer representation is brought into this book felt very... [Jamie: Natural?] Yeah natural.

Jamie: And that was both the asexuality of, I'm gonna, what was the king's name?

Amber: Ine

Jamie: I pronounced it Ine, like Duncan Hine. [Laughter]

Amber: I- that might have been correct. The beginning of this book does have a couple of pronunciations, but the language referenced the most seems to be Welsh, and try as I might it is not a language that I am very good at being able to read, so [laughter].

Jamie: I think probably just given your background you have a much better insight into pronunciation than I do. [Laughter] So his asexuality was really well done too, and I liked that-how it was where like he was aware of it when he was growing up, and his like, sibling who also was asexual also recognized it, but like nobody else really talked about it and there was all this pressure on him of course as a king to have an heir and like secure his bloodline, but he found a wife who, if they had been a little bit more open with it, they probably could have been fine. Like him actually telling her why.

Amber: Yeah, their relationship seemed very like, based in a real friendship, between them. [Jamie: A mutual respect.] They really liked each other just as people.

Jamie: Yeah!

Amber: But not knowing that caused Æthel a lot of strain both in the way that she didn't understand why he didn't want her, and also in the way that other people viewed their relationship.

Jamie: Because then of course that pressure was on Æthel because, she was the woman who's not producing an heir, so people were looking down on her and not so much holding the king responsible for it, because of course they don't have those kinds of insights into the relationship.

Amber: Yeah, and also its, it's not something that I think most of the courtiers would have even suspected, because even today I don't think people really consider the existence of asexuality very often [laughter].

Jamie: And then, to go on the rest of the theme of why this book is for the podcast, Æthel herself says that she's attracted to both men and women, and so that's why she had gotten married to...

Amber: Ine.

Jamie: Ine, thank you, I was totally blanking on it again. And then she had a relationship partway through the book with Herla.

Amber: Yes, she was, I think- again this is not a word that is ever used in the book, but I think she is maybe polyamorous. Because she seemed to be genuinely in love with both people and at some point there is discussion of whether she can fulfill those particular needs outside of her marriage. And even though there is some jealousy that needs to be worked through, it is a discussion that she is, is willing to have and I think is feeling positive towards.

Jamie: Mhm. And in a discussion between her and Herla, they had both said like, they think it's possible to give your heart completely to different people. It doesn't necessarily have to be just one person.

Amber: Yeah, Herla actually, I mean, she's not an active participant in the story that's happening right now, but Herla was also in love with Boudicca, that's why she went to make a deal that she thought would help, because she was- I mean she believed in the cause that they were fighting for, but she was also in love with her. So I think Herla was also probably a little bit polyamorous, just, yeah.

Jamie: And then, the deal that Herla entered into with- I'm gonna completely butcher this, Gwyn ap Nudd? [Amber: Yeah.] Okay yay! Was very much how in fairy tales you're always warned, do not trust deals with the fair folk, because they will always, like, come out better in the end. [Amber: Mhm] And so Herla had entered into this, going to him, knowing the risks, though not quite all of the risks, because she wanted the power to drive Romans from her lands, and then when she finally woke up she discovered it was 300 years later and Boudicca and all of her people were gone. [Amber: Mhm] Which is just devastating. And then she spends the next 300 years just in this, like, horrible pattern of like only being awake and alive-ish but driven completely by instinct to lead the wild hunt during the old moon each month.

Amber: Yeah, and she just doesn't have any control over her own actions at that point.

Jamie: Her and her band of 19 riders, they're not themselves. They don't talk to each other, it's just all riding, killing, and, yeah. Anyways. She does not get the good end of that bargain.

Amber: No, she did not. I also thought it was nice that like- Sorry this is back to the queerness, Æthel being into women was like just not even a question. That is one thing that was just never talked about; like they didn't seem to like need to. I was like, uh, my wife likes this other lady, that's just, ah, I cannot leave. But like the fact that the person she was interested in was a woman was like not even a consideration there.

Jamie: Yeah, that was really interesting, and I love how Æthel like intentionally clued Herla into that by saying that she had had like her first kiss with another girl when she was 14 [Amber: Mhm] just like sneaking it into conversation there. [laughter]

Amber: Honestly, good for Æthel. So this book had just a, such a, I don't know, the atmosphere of this book was just really all-encompassing. I guess, when I was reading it, it felt very much like when, you know, you're little and you're reading a fantasy book for the first time and like you're *in* it, um-

Jamie: Very atmospheric.

Amber: Thank you, atmospheric is the word I was looking for. And I, I really enjoyed that, because I feel like as an adult it's harder to find fantasy books that like feel so immersive.

Jamie: Mhm, definitely, yeah. Like, a good sense of what it smelled like, what it felt like, the author was really good at including that. And I know a couple people had said that it went on for a really long time, I felt though like she included the scenes that gave you context into the situation, that's background into the characters that made you appreciate their actions that much more.

Amber: Yeah, I would have to agree. I didn't think it went on- I mean when I looked at the book it was thicker than I expected [laughter] but I did not think anything that was in there was like superfluous to like what was going on. And I think part of that is that the atmosphere wasn't just the characters and their actions but like the land was, it was a character in itself in this book. A big part of it was the, I think at this point they're Saxons, Æthel and Ine are before the Normans came in, I don't know how much you know about British history. [Laughter] They got invaded by the Romans, and then the Saxons, which is where Anglo-Saxon comes from, and then by the Normans, and that is what led to like modern Britain. Anyway, all that to say, when the Saxons were in England it is when, or the island, it wasn't England yet, that is when Christianity started coming onto the island, and a big part of it was pushing out native religions. And that comes into play a lot in this book because there's a whole group of people, they call them the Wealas I believe, but it's like an early version of Welsh, held onto their religion a lot longer than the- a lot of other native peoples of Britain. But their understanding of the land and the power it holds was a really big factor in this book. Ine has to deal with being a descendant of, well he's a descendant of Constantine, and with that comes some effects that he was not prepared for, but something that happens really early in the book is that the king of the Welsh gets killed. In fact, by Ine's brother. And so that power has to pass somewhere. And unexpectedly, it passes to Ine. So that's something that he is dealing with and that he has to figure out how to wield and use for the betterment of all of the people that live there, not just for his own, and later in the book we find out that it's, he's dealing with his brother trying to usurp him at home, but there's also a supernatural force that, if it is not dealt with, is going to be everyone's problem.

Jamie: All kinds of fun things. That actually reminds me of a quote that Ine was thinking about, just the prevalence of Christianity and how it takes over cultures, mostly just by like starting with like the festivals, so: "-pagan rites, and yet they are similar to those performed at All Hallows, Ine reflects, not for the first time he wonders at the Christian festivals and the way they follow the old religion, laying new ideas atop those established millennia before. Clever. Calculated even. It's another pattern, a very human kind. The pattern of control. One, as king, he is supposed to have mastered."

Amber: I've always found that really interesting, how all like major Christian holidays just fall on pagan holidays. Recently I was doing research for my job, because I, I'm figuring out what we're going to do around Christmas, like around the holidays, and I was looking to see what kind of winter holidays happened in Pennsylvania in the, I think I was looking at the 18- no, 1700s, and there were people then still who, different religious sects who did not celebrate Christmas because they knew it was based on a pagan festival and they thought that that was too close to steering away from Christianity.

Jamie: Yes. Just a really funny perspective on the “War on Christmas” where it's like, no, you've-bring Christmas to us. [laughter]

Amber: Right, this- I feel like this was like, your bad. But yeah, it's so interesting because like I think today because so many of us live in like towns and cities, we don't get to experience just the land without modern technology around, but-

Jamie: There's always like the layer of manmade overtop of nature.

Amber: Exactly. But I, in my current job, am working right next to the Susquehanna river every day. And I just get to look out and stare at it. And when you, when you're around those kinds of natural formations regularly, you kind of start to understand why people in the past felt such power in the land and, and did base their religions around it. I just find it really interesting. And this one, like I said, literally the land is a character.

Jamie: The supernatural forces, on one side, are the people who are trying to remove the ability to connect with the land from the native people, who, funnily enough, it's the supernaturals and like the Christians on that side, and then the other side is the supernatural in the form of Herla and the native Britons and it's just talking about like lots of battles, lots of things; it's very atmospheric, it's a book that interestingly combines mythology, history, and relationship-type stuff but it does a good job of like mixing it all in there so you don't feel like you're just reading a romance or just reading a, um, historical fiction, it's just this lovely combination.

Amber: Yeah. There's like a lot of different elements. Like different subplots that are happening at the same time. And the way that it- it weaves fantasy with history, very much like the way that it weaves in queerness, it just felt really natural. The setting that Lucy Holland creates, it doesn't feel weird that suddenly like, there is some glowing light and things are happening. It feels like that is very natural for them.

Jamie: And if you end up reading this book and you really enjoy it, there's actually a book that Lucy Holland had written previously that comes before, like its set 300 years prior to it and it touches briefly on some of those characters and some of the things that happened, so. If you enjoy this one you have another to look forward to right away.

[Outro music]

Narrator: 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 for listening!

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