

[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 good LGBTQ+ read. Listen in as queer library staff discuss the own-voice stories they've been reading.

[Music]

Em: My name is Em and I use they/them pronouns.

Dani: Hi, I'm Dani, and I use they/them pronouns.

Em: And today we are talking about *Most Ardently* by Gabe Cole Novoa.

Dani: Gabe Cole Novoa, uses pronouns he/him, is a Latinx transmasculine, award-winning, *New York Times* Bestselling author who writes speculative fiction featuring marginalized characters grappling with identity. Now leveled up with an MFA in Writing for Children, when he isn't answering emails at his day job, or buried under his two cats, you'll likely find him knitting or crocheting something cute. Gabe is the author of *The Wicked Bargain*, *Most Ardently: A Pride & Prejudice Retelling*, *The Diablo's Curse*, and the *Beyond the Red* trilogy, written under a former pseudonym. You can find him across a variety of social media sites at @thegabecole.

Em: So a little bit of description about the remixed classics series, it includes authors from marginalized backgrounds reinterpreting classic works through their own cultural lenses to subvert the overwhelming cis het, white, and male canon. This bittersweet *Pride and Prejudice* remix follows a trans boy yearning for the freedom to live openly, centering queerness in a well-known story of longing, and subverting society's patriarchal and cis-heteronormative expectations.

Em: London, 1812. Oliver Bennet feels trapped. Not just by the endless corsets, petticoats and skirts he's forced to wear on a daily basis, but also by society's expectations. The world—and the vast majority of his family and friends—think Oliver is a girl named Elizabeth. He is therefore expected to mingle at balls wearing a pretty dress, entertain suitors regardless of his interest in them, and ultimately become someone's wife. But Oliver can't bear the thought of such a fate. He finds solace in the few times he can sneak out of his family's home and explore the city rightfully dressed as a young gentleman. It's during one such excursion when Oliver becomes acquainted with Darcy, a sulky young man who had been rude to "Elizabeth" at a recent social function. But in the comfort of being out of the public eye, Oliver comes to find that Darcy is actually a sweet, intelligent boy with a warm heart. And not to mention incredibly attractive. As Oliver is able to spend more time as his true self, often with Darcy, part of him dares begin to hope that his dream of love and life as a man to be possible. But suitors are growing bolder—and even threatening—and his mother is growing more desperate to see him

settled into an engagement. Oliver will have to choose: Settle for safety, security, and a life of pretending to be something he's not, or risk it all for a slim chance at freedom, love, and a life that can be truly, honestly his own.

Em: This book is dedicated, "To my trans siblings, we deserve romances that will sweep us off our feet too. That's why this book is for you."

Dani: Content warnings from the author include, "You'll find in these pages a trans boy who has not yet come out to his family, navigating a richly cis-heteronormative society. The nature of this story means that Oliver's deadname is used repeatedly, he frequently experiences dysphoria, and he is misgendered by characters in the book, though never by the narrative. For many of us, these are wounds that can be painful to revisit, so while I did my best to broach these difficult moments with empathy, you know what you can handle best."

Em: So, let's get into it. I think a lot of us are familiar with Pride and Prejudice, I love the movie version, I have not read the original, have you read the original?

Dani: No, and I am going to ruffle some feathers, but Pride and Prejudice is not my favorite movie or book.

Em: That's valid!

Dani: I'm sorry.

Em: No, I don't, I think that's, I think that's reasonable. I think Austen is definitely, if you love her you love her, but if she's not your jam it's like, a lot of her stuff is kind of similar. I might ruffle some feathers by saying that, if, like we have some die hard Austen fans that are like, well actually, each and every one of her novels is uniquely its own and here are the reasons why, but I've read excerpts of original Pride and Prejudice because I took 18th century lit in college and she's, like what she does as a writer is so cool in terms of form and function and writing these passive conversations that, like her style of writing, I'm going to sound like a idiot trying to explain this but she, she wrote in a way that people just didn't at the time, and it was so novel the way she described like, the actions of people, and people... I don't know, her prose was just, was just completely its own. And her being this satirist writing about women's issues in a time when women aren't writing, you know, I'm not really a big Jane Austen fan myself, I like her prose a lot but I think it's, it's tough for me to get through personally, th- it's just so, there's just so much. They're just so long, and I really appreciate what she represents in literary canon, but

yeah I'd have to agree with you she's not like my, I'm not a die hard Jane Austen fan, right, yeah.

Em: But that didn't stop me from enjoying this book at all, or like appreciating what Novoa is trying to do? I don't know, what do you think, did you like this? Did you not like this? What are your thoughts.

Dani: Yeah, I really liked it. I think the problem with *Pride and Prejudice*, well the last time I tried to watch the movie I was like 8, so [laughter] but, I don't think I liked all of like the heteronormative like, closeness in there, and like this one just seems more wholesome in a way?

Em: Yeah it's, it's really interesting.

Dani: I don't know how to describe it.

Em: *Pride and Prejudice* itself talks a lot about the woman's position, particularly, like Lizzie's position being in a family with all daughters and no male heir to inherit the land, so they're trying to get the girls married so they can keep the land in the family, like they're very real, I don't want to say sociopolitical, but I guess socioeconomic things that Austen is talking about, and the plight of women not being able to own property, and I think it's so fascinating to put gender in that in a different- like trans rhetoric on top of that, like what if Lizzie was trans? What, not only is there this incredible amount of societal pressure for, for Oliver to get married, because he's seen as "Lizzie," right, but he's not even Lizzie. You know. I think it added that extra layer that for me was really interesting to, to look at and to discuss.

Em: But no, it's, it's really so interesting looking at like gender in this time, and I included a bunch of stuff in this outline, obviously you know as we talked about it, we don't have to talk about all of it, but something that was really fascinating to me was learning about this time period was the very public trial of Oscar Wilde, which this book takes place, *Pride and Prejudice* takes place a little bit before Oscar Wilde is publicly tried for being a homosexual as a result of letters being exposed, he was like in an affair with the son of someone very high up in like the social, political, sociopolitical ladder whatever. [Dani: Mhm] So *Pride and Prejudice* takes place in, uh, the regency era, excuse me, not Victorian era, not Elizabethan era, in fact the one in between. [Laughter] I got it super wrong, but *Pride and Prejudice* takes place in 1813, which is the regency era, which is this in-between period between this era previously, where people were allowed to be really openly queer, and the period after which is the Victorian era, which is extremely like, notoriously they just don't communicate. They don't talk about their feelings.

That's where you get like the language of flowers and all of this communication that happens nonverbally, the language of like fans and stuff, it's like a whole thing. And a lot of that happens in the Victorian era because Oscar Wilde, this very famous playwright, goes very publicly to trial, and then they convict him, he goes to jail, and it's kind of, I don't know, there's this very real fear I think for Darcy and Oliver in this book about being a queer person. For me I didn't really feel like there was a fear of getting in legal trouble necessarily. Right, it was more a fear of not being accepted, or I guess in Oliver's case, this fear of like, will I ever actually get to live as a man? Right? Or will I be stuck marrying someone, and forced to be someone's wife. It's like not even on his radar that this could be, like I could go to jail for this, right. Because I think it's not technically illegal until a little bit later. But it's this period of time where like people know that there's queer people but it's very much an unspoken, like it'll put shame on your family name type thing. [Dani: Mhm] Which like doesn't really exist as a talking point in *Pride and Prejudice*. But I'm yapping, yapping, yapping. I'm so sorry Dani.

Dani: You're good, [laughter] I was going to say, I love these like remixed books because they place queerness into a time period that you didn't think about queerness existing in, and then it sends you down the rabbit hole and then you have to read multiple gay historical fiction romances [laughter] because you're stuck in that loop. But yeah it was really interesting, I really love learning about that time period, and seeing how queer people would have lived back then is like really eye opening. [Em: Mmm] And even though this book... it had a happier ending, which I appreciate, it was just nice seeing them have a happy ending, especially with their families.

Em: Yeah I honestly, I want to ask you about the ending because Novoa actually puts a note in the end of this about the legitimacy of Oliver's like being able to- I don't know if we can talk about this because I don't know if that's a spoiler, but I feel like people know what happens in *Pride and Prejudice*, right? [Dani: Yeah] So Oliver being born a woman doesn't affect his, in fact because he transitions, it's like, oh, now my son can inherit the house. It's like the solution that everybody's looking for [Dani: Mhm] but I don't know how historically accurate that is, like Gabe Cole Novoa writes a note about this that I thought was fascinating, that birth certificates didn't even exist in England until July 1, 1837, so there wouldn't actually have been any record of Oliver being mistaken as a girl at birth. [Dani: Ah] "At the end of the day, many historical trans people we know about, we only know about because their transness was discovered, often, not always, after their death. I like to think there are plenty of trans people we don't know about who lived their lives as themselves without ever being outed." Which I thought was so fascinating, [Dani: Mhm] right? Like I got through this book, and like you said I was really pleasantly surprised that the ending was like, pretty nice, it- it works out for everybody, for the most part, except for the terrible characters, but it never works out for the terrible characters

they're always bad. [Dani: They had it coming, yeah] But I was like, how would that work, right? Like would the government really accept the legitimacy of Oliver being, like a male heir? And yeah, I guess, in theory it would have worked, if everybody's on board, like there's no birth certificate, you just show up at the bank like this is my son, he owns the house now. And nobody can – like what are they going to tell you, no? [Laughter] Yeah, like. That was something that was really interesting to me, kind of like you said with the putting queerness in a context that you wouldn't have thought about, or at least I don't really think about that often aside from like, oh it must've been so hard, right, but in a lot of ways for people I think it was easier, you know? [Dani: Hmm] Because they, at least in this period they don't even have, like, a record of your birth. If you're passing, right, who's going to say otherwise? Which I thought was really interesting. What did you think about the molly houses? Because those-

Dani: Oh my god that was so interesting because I literally researched that, I never heard of that I was like molly house?

Em: Yes, I had not either. So molly houses are a big aspect of this book, it's where Oliver and Darcy spend a lot of time together, and in fact Oliver realizes that Darcy likes him because he finds him at a molly house which is essentially like a youth club for, not explicitly for queer people, but it's commonly known amongst people that, that they're for queer people. [Dani: Mhm] And those are real, they existed! And I thought that that was like the coolest thing in the world. [Laughter] What did you learn about them, if you don't mind my asking?

Dani: Let me think, like how they were funded and everything, and to me they just sounded like a fun little gay club! [Laughter]

Em: Yeah, they were described so pleasantly and I really really liked that. [Laughter][Dani: Unintelligible] There was this, also in the historical note from Novoa, it says that they were indeed a part of England's queer culture in Oliver's time, referring to molly houses, "The name came from the term molly, slang for an effeminate man that was sometimes used as a slur and sometimes used as a common noun." We have some similar words, but I'm not going to say them on this podcast.

Dani: Yeah. [Laughter]

Em: "While some amount of sex and sex work took place at these molly houses, most of them were more like clubs, some of which were known to host very early versions of drag balls, or coffeehouses like the one Oliver attends. Unfortunately, which is very much like today, molly houses were sometimes the target of police raids, both in the 1700s and 1800s, leading to

arrests and violence, but even with that risk, they provided some of the only safe places for queer men in particular to be themselves.” He does make a mention that molly houses in Most Ardently are intentionally a little bit more inclusive, because historically we don't actually have much evidence of queer women attending these sorts of establishments, we do however know that trans people and people in drag were very welcome. So that was something that really, like reading that and knowing that made me so satisfied in a way that I didn't know that I was wanting. Or, I don't want to say needing, but, yeah I thought that was such a cool- not only do we get this very complex nuanced revisiting of this, this classic, but we also get this historical context that I think a lot of us... I don't, I really wanted and needed and didn't know that I did and, just any time I get an opportunity to learn about queer people in another time, especially in such a delightful context like, I don't know, it feels like a treat, you know?

Dani: Yeah. It's nice learning about different like houses and environments where queer people could just hang out, [Em: Yeah] like it doesn't really change, which is, you know, positive and negative in someways, but anyhow it's very affirming.

Em: Yeah. I wish I could go to a molly house, that's the only thing I was thinking, like that sounds great, what?

Dani: I'll go back in time, only for the molly house, and then ill leave, that's it.

Em: Yep, there you go. There you go. No that's valid. It might not even be fun. [Dani: Yeah...] But it sounds- it sounded so fun! [Laughter] I wanted to ask you what you thought about just Darcy as a character in this one, and-

Dani: He was very sassy. [Laughter] [Em: Yeah] The way he acted with women, I was like oh, do we have a misogynist on our hands?

Em: He was so rude, yeah. Well its interesting too that reframing of him just being bad at communication because he's gay and doesn't want to talk to women, and like as just a bad communicator otherwise it's just so funny to me. [Laughter] [Dani: Yeah] And just uh, I don't know sticking his foot in his mouth. Good old Darcy.

Dani: [Laughter] Yeah. What was the scene where they were, um, about to play cards or something at the sisters-

Em: Oh, at the boys' club? Yeah.

Dani: They were in um, oh I forgot, the one guy's name who married Oliver's sister.

Em: His friend, Bingsley, is that his name? Bing-

Dani: No, the nice one. [Laughter]

Em: I thought that- yeah that's Bingley.

Dani: Okay, okay, yeah. No, wa-

Em: Not the captain, wait what's his name... Again, we're- we're, the Austen-heads are gonna come for us [laughter] we- I know there are some people who can tell you the characters like, off the top of their head. [Dani: Yeah] The soldier guy. Is that- the mean one is the soldier guy, is that what you mean?

Dani: Yeah, yeah. But when they were all in the room with Bingley's sisters, Darcy kept on being so rude to them, that was hilarious. They were like "Oh, do you want to play with uh, Lizzie?" And he was like, no.

Em: Yeah, literally he was like "I have no interest in this at all whatsoever." And then they're just picking on him. Oh, we haven't talked at all about Charlotte, who also exists in Pride and Prejudice, the original, but in Pride and Prejudice remixed, Most Ardently, she is still Oliver's best friend, but she is actually a closeted gay woman, and she is in a relationship with a woman who is married. And she does still get engaged to Mr. Bingley, after Mr. Bingley proposes to Oliver and gets declined, and Oliver having heard of this proposal that Charlotte has accepted, knowing who she is really, he gets really angry. And they have this confrontation that I thought was really... Charlotte is not the most supportive of Oliver in that moment, because Oliver says like, you are lying to yourself if you get married to him, what about your relationship to the love of your life? I know she's married, but you know, you, you love her, and if you get married what are you going to do? And Charlotte basically responds, like, I don't have any other options, I'm a woman in society, I have to get married. Like we can't just be gay. And essentially says to Oliver like, you might not even get to be... you know, like you should start thinking about what your future looks like because you might not get to be Oliver forever. And it's like, ooh man that hurts. [Dani: Yeah] In that moment, that scene in particular was like, I think a hard one to get through because it's like this is Oliver's person, Oliver trusts Charlotte, Charlotte knows everything about him, and she encourages him to hide that after he, not necessarily encourages him to hide it, but encourages him to think very critically about the rest of his life and what that

actually means in practice. And... that like sets Oliver off in a way that is really upset- is honestly really upsetting.

Dani: Yeah. I don't think she was like not being supportive, I mean, she was kind of rude about it, but... I think at the end of the day she was just trying to look out for him, because, like, I assume being openly queer trans back then would not be the greatest and you would have to think about like the long term goals, which brings up a lot of nuances I guess.

Em: Yeah. Well it's just the conversation about like.... these same issues of, I guess gender hierarchy, that exist in Pride and Prejudice and sort of class, the second class status of women, they still exist in this book and are compounded by this issue of queerness where it's like, this closeted queer woman is telling her closeted trans friend, hey it's easier to just do what you're supposed to, essentially. [Dani: Mhm, yeah] Like you might end up really hurt if you try to do, which again is like, she's trying to be supportive, but it comes across as...

Dani: Negative.

Em: Negative, yeah, for lack of a better word. She's scared for Oliver, right, I think Oliver's scared for himself, but Charlotte in particular, she comes back and apologizes about it later but, I think in the moment, like they don't talk for a while after that, the two of them, and that I think is, is one of the bigger moments of tension in the book [Dani: Mhm] that just really lays out the stakes in a way that... I don't know. It hurts, but it's a good read. I liked this book.

Dani: Yeah. It was overall positive, made me cry a couple times.

Em: Me too! Oh, and th- the scene where Oliver comes out to his dad, that was so-

Dani: That was so wholesome!

Em: Oh my gosh. I don't want to spoil anything for anybody on the podcast even though I've already been just yapping about the plot points, [laughter] but that in particular, I'm not going to tell you what happens because it's really good. It's really good. I listened to the audiobook and I distinctly remember driving in my car when that scene came on and just sobbing at a red light. [Dani: Oh no!] [Laughter] And like, I need to pull over for a second. It was just so. So touching. [Dani: Yeah] And I really, that's something that I did appreciate was the, the relationship between Oliver and his father in this is, pretty similar I think, again I haven't read the book but I'm very familiar with the movie, but Lizzie has a really strong relationship with her dad in Pride and Prejudice and it's more so her mom that is the driving factor of pushing the

daughters to get married. And yes, the father's worried about the estate, but he's more worried about the happiness of his children, and that is very much the same in this book, in fact maybe a little bit better, I thought Mr. Bennet was just a cheeky character and I really liked him a lot.

Dani: [Laughter] He's such a classic dad.

Em: Love him! Love him! Like he just loves his kids and wants them to be happy, and maybe it's going to be difficult, but he'd rather them be happy than have the easiest life in the world and be miserable, you know? Which is cool. Really cool. And it's, it's nice to see that also. Because it could have been like bad for Oliver, but at the end of the day everything works out. For the most part.

Dani: Yeah, I think it was good to have a happy ending for something set in such a drastic time period.

Em: Mmmm.

Dani: Maybe I read way too many depressing books, but [laughter] this was a, this was a good one.

Em: I was going to say, I know you to be a horror reader. Like a sci-fi fantasy, like, horror guy, so I was a little bit surprised when we were paired for this one, but I'm glad you liked it. I liked it too.

Dani: Yeah, I'm dipping my toes more into the queer romances, so. [Em: Yeah]

Em: I'm not a big romance reader, but the queer romances, I think – that's why I'm not a big romance reader is I just don't, I'm not compelled, but the queer ones? [Dani: Yeah] Those I can't get into. [Laughter] I want to let our listeners know that if you are interested in reading this Remixed Classic, there are also a host of other Remixed Classics that you could get your hands on from authors, some of which we've talked about on the podcast before. There's a Treasure Island remix called A Clash of Steel that's written by C.B. Lee, there's also a Great Gatsby remix called Self-Made Boys by Anna-Amrie McLemore, and there's also, amongst other things, there is a Jekyll and Hyde remix called My Dear Henry by Kalynn Bayron, many more where that came from, I just named a few, because the titles honestly get me a bit, they're funny. [Laughter]

Dani: Yeah. The doctor Jekyll and Hyde one was very good, I recommend it.

Em: Oh good to know! You heard it here first folks.

Dani: We have it at the library! [Laughter]

Em: As soon as you're done reading *Most Ardently*, then you have to check out *My Dear Henry*, a *Jekyll and Hyde* remix. Maybe we'll talk about it next season. [Laughter] So that wraps up our discussion of *Most Ardently* by Gabe Cole Novoa. Join us next episode as we discuss another book available in our collection here at the Dauphin County Library System.

[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 the podcast, please follow us for more book discussions. And if we've piqued your interest in this episode's selection, consider borrowing it from your local library. Thanks for listening!

[Outro music]