

[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]

Goldie: Hi there, my name is Goldie Blickstein, my pronouns are she/her.

Annika: And I am Annika, my pronouns are any. This week's novel is *Someone You Can Build a Nest In* by John Wiswell. The book description from the publisher is as such: "Shesheshen has made a mistake fatal to all monsters: she's fallen in love. Shesheshen is a shapeshifter, who happily resides as an amorphous lump at the bottom of a ruined manor. When her rest is interrupted by hunters intent on murdering her, she constructs a body from the remains of past meals: a metal chain for a backbone, borrowed bones for limbs, and a bear trap as an extra mouth. However, the hunters chase Shesheshen out of her home and off a cliff. Badly hurt, she's found and nursed back to health by Homily, a warm-hearted human, who has mistaken Shesheshen as a fellow human. Homily is kind and nurturing and would make an excellent co-parent: an ideal place to lay Shesheshen's eggs so their young could devour Homily from the inside out." Sounds friendly. [Laughter] "But as they grow close, she realizes humans don't think about love that way. Shesheshen hates keeping her identity secret from Homily, but just as she's about to confess, Homily reveals why she's in the area: she's hunting a shapeshifting monster that supposedly cursed her family. Has Shesheshen seen it anywhere? Eating her girlfriend isn't an option. Shesheshen didn't curse anyone, but to give herself and Homily a chance at happiness, she has to figure out why Homily's twisted family thinks she did. As the hunt for the monster becomes increasingly deadly, Shesheshen must unearth the truth quickly, or soon both of their lives will be at risk. And the bigger challenge remains: surviving her toxic in-laws long enough to learn to build a life with, rather than in, the love of her life."

Goldie: John Wiswell is a disabled author who lives where New York keeps all its trees. His fiction has been translated into ten languages. He won the 2021 Nebula Award for best short story for *Open House on Haunted Hill*, and the 2022 Locus Award for best novelette for *That Story Isn't the Story*. He has also been a finalist for the Hugo, World Fantasy, and British Fantasy awards. He dreams of hugging a kaiju. And then the content warnings are graphic violence, gore, abuse, body horror.

Annika: We won't be doing any of those things during this podcast, but if you read the book, [Goldie: Yes] you will definitely run into those.

Goldie: Definitely. That shapeshifter is actually kind of gruesome.

Annika: Absolutely, but amazing. [Laughter]

Goldie: Yes! The very first page of the book in itself is not something I've read in my entire life, just the way it's worded and everything, like his entrails? [Laughter]

Annika: Yes, this author... surely has a way with words. He can describe to you the most horrific things, but the way he does it is such a dry humorous way that you're left kind of feeling pretty good about it, honestly. [Laughter]

Goldie: Yes, I don't think I've every heard anyone treat gruesome horror this way, [Annika: No] to be honest.

Annika: I'm going to be honest with you, I don't think I've been as rabid about reading a book as I was when I read this one since Gideon the Ninth, and I guess that's because I see myself so much in it as compared to a lot of books out there. Yes, I just said that I see myself in a book about a shapeshifter made of goo, but [laughter] go with this, so as she is an ace character, and also a literal gender fluid, I feel pretty close to her. [Laughter]

Goldie: Aww. I kind of like Homily, because she's very nice even though she has no idea this thing is... a thing, [Annika: Yeah] she's just, let me help you out there! You know, like, so sweet. Until, until you meet the family [Annika: Yeah] and then you're like, oh man.

Annika: Yeah. And then you're like wow, I understand why you're like that now. [Laughter]

Goldie: Right? [Annika: Yeah] Shesheshen is an interesting character at the least... interesting.

Annika: Absolutely. And even though on the surface you're looking at a character who is this rather horrific character, I mean she eats people and then absorbs them, like a gelatinous cube except with shape [laughter] and you would think that in general you w- you wouldn't be rooting for this very horrific character, but she has such a- a personality and uh- I love all the times when she says something very literal about eating people, and Homily is like 'Oh you silly! You're so funny' [laughter] and Shesheshen is like am I? Because I want to go eat that dude. [Laughter] [Goldie: Yeah] Oh, you silly.

Goldie: Uh huh. Yes I love how Shesheshen is saying things and just being literal about it, and Homily thinks she's being nice or silly or whatever. Like there's even one where she's like rolling and cracking up and she's just like stop it! [Laughter] But she's just being literal about what's happening, its great. [Annika: Yeah] I do like the, the one that they mentioned was, without giving the story away, like an example of the crazy humor of this creature, they go into a place where there's a lot of incense going on and this creature says, you know, when humans are burning something they're up to something bad. Whenever humans are burning something, it's

just incense, but this monster's like if they're burning something, they're up to trouble.
[Laughter]

Annika: Yes. Oh, and the amount of time that she complains about various organs like, when she drinks things and puts it in her lung, and she's like I don't understand why people like these things so much. [Laughter]

Goldie: Yeah. I mean the monster can be hurt, but then at the same time they can also shapeshift out things that they don't want in their body. [Annika: Mhm] Almost like they're shaking their leg and it's like falling out. That's not something humans can do.

Annika: But sometimes I sure wish I could! [Laughter] [Goldie: Right?] The amount of times that I've asked people to take out my spine for me, shake it out and then put it back in, and this girl, she can, so I'm like kind of jealous really. [Laughter]

Goldie: Right? And I bet she doesn't get any muscle aches or anything. It is kind of funny how you go by the structure of this thing, [Annika: Mhm] it's solely an imagination, like I don't know that they would be able to even make this book into a movie, because it's so good, I guess, in describing this monster.

Annika: Right, and so much of it also is like inside her mind, when she's sitting there with- and Homily's family is being terrible, and she's like, is it wrong to tell your girlfriend that you want to eat her mom?

Goldie: Yes! [Laughter]

Annika: You can't- that won't really translate to the screen.

Goldie: Right, right. Because a lot of it was Shesheshen's thinking, [Annika: Right] and that's what made it interesting, because Homily had no idea, Homily just thought she was a human the whole time.

Annika: Right, right! One of the things that intrigued me the most about this book was the fact that your point of view character is ostensibly the monster, she's this creature that lives underneath an abandoned manor house, she sleeps in a puddle, she's a liquid, mostly, like she uses people's bones to give herself shape, but it's very funny, because when you're reading it, the actual monsters turn out to be the people. And it just is very interesting to have the point of view of the monster and have her be like, these people are terrible. [Laughter]

Goldie: Yes, yes! There are times when the monster is just being 100% honest, but the stuff that she's saying that the people are doing is way more hideous than anything she's ever done. Because she's eaten people, right, [Annika: Right] but she hasn't strung people up or abused them or imprisoned them or upset their- you know what I mean.

Annika: Right, she's almost very Dexter in like who she eats. She eats the bad ones. [Laughter]

Goldie: Yeah.

Annika: I also really enjoyed in this book the idea of what is beautiful, because when Homily is first described, you're seeing her for the first time through Shesheshen's eyes, and Shesheshen is just immediately in love with her. And one of the phrases that I remember very well is that she is beautifully pockmarked, and I'm like, beautifully pockmarked? That's amazing! [Laughter] [Goldie: Aww] Because this monster is looking at this woman and seeing the things that normally, what we call normal humans would look at as probably being negative, and seeing it as beauty, and I just really enjoyed that. Kind of flipping everything on its head, not just the what is a monster, but do we really have to all believe the same thing is beautiful.

Goldie: Yes, that's true, and there's so many different ways to describe beauty, but I do like that she's not your typical 6 foot 2 stick figure with huge rack, you know what I'm saying, [Annika: Yeah] she's a normal human being and this monster fell in love with her and thinks that's gorgeous. [Annika: Right] That is pretty interesting, and it's a different point of view almost when reading the book, I've just never, honestly I've never read a book that had a point of view like that. Especially from a monster.

Annika: Yeah, absolutely. It's such a different kind of read.

Goldie: It is! It is such a different kind of read that you almost kind of have to see what's happening, I mean, to be honest I read this book because, I'm going to be doing a podcast on it, but also, when I got like halfway through I was just like, I have to see how this ends. Like, you know what I mean, there is a part where like, things change up a little bit, and at that point I was like ope! Now I need to know. Not going anywhere now. [Laughter]

Annika: Yeah I actually read this before we even put it in the voting for the podcast, and that was exactly what happened with me, I was listening to it and there was no point in which I was bored. I'm always the person that's trying to figure out what's gonna happen next, and honestly, there was no point that I knew what was going to happen next either. [Laughter]

Goldie: Yeah! That's what it is! You're like, some books you can read and you have a kind of feel, sort of, for what's coming, but this one was like I have no idea what's going to pop up next.

Annika: Absolutely.

Goldie: Like I don't know where this is heading! That's how it keeps you engrossed, actually. [Laughter][Annika: Yeah] because you end up getting involved in the characters, Shesheshen and Homily, and then when you meet the other characters you're just like oh, now I need to

know what's going on here. [Annika: Right, yeah] Like how is Homily even mixed in with these people is what you end up thinking. [Laughter]

Annika: Yeah exactly. It's like, she's so normal, how did that happen? [Laughter]

Goldie: It's also a very interesting book because this love story is not like, I mean no offense to any romance novels, but this love story is not smut. It's a love story like I've never witnessed before. They genuinely want to help each other.

Annika: Yeah. That's part of what I find really beautiful about it, is, as an ace person I often find it really hard to read regular romance novels because I'm reading through it and I'm like, well, okay, where's the story, can we get past the other stuff? [Laughter] [Goldie: Yeah] And it was nice that this was a romance that focused more on the feelings, not the lust, not that that's a bad thing, if you're into the lust enjoy that, but it's good to get the other side too.

Goldie: Yes, absolutely! I think this was a breath of fresh air for me, as far as reading, because I've not ever read anything like this, honestly, and it's also great that they can put out a love story for those folks who don't enjoy smut, because as I've lived my forty six years of life I'm finding there are more and more people out there that are different in different ways, and I love that there can be love stories for them also.

Annika: Yes, absolutely, and on the topic of stories for people who don't generally get stories, I looked up a couple of interviews from the author himself to see what he had to say about his story, which is a great story and a great read in its own right, but once you look up the information about it he says that as an aro ace disabled neurodivergent person, he didn't really see himself in much, I'll just read this quote for you, [Goldie: Mhm] he says, "The notion of shapeshifters is often the notion of passing, which is often a very queer, very disabled experience, trying to seem like everyone else, making your disabilities invisible. In fantastic literature, you can talk about that in a more direct physical/tactile sense, so on one degree, it was very familiar, shapeshifters just do this, but when I was like, let's make it difficult for her, let's have challenges in the way the- presenting a disabled body gets." And that's what I was thinking about it when you were saying she discards pieces as she needs to, but she's also a very fragile character in that she needs those mobility assistants, maybe her mobility assistant is somebody else's femur, but we don't judge. [Laughter]

Goldie: Yeah, she does mention smiling with the teeth of the person that she ate, several times.

Annika: Yes, oh yes. [Laughter]

Goldie: So I do find it interesting, in the book, that Shesheshen mentions the one thing that she cannot extract out of her body is memories. [Annika: Mm. Mhm.] That was really good because, when put into a difficult situation, Shesheshen would not want to eat them, because they do

feel for them, and they love them, so they're like oh... it's so cool that I can kick out these broken bones or whatever I don't need, but I can't squish out the memories.

Annika: Right, yeah. [Laughter] Very true.

Goldie: It is very exciting though, this book, I did not expect the surprises that popped up and things like that. You know, because they're a shapeshifter, so [Annika: Right] shapeshifters can literally shapeshift into anything, most of the time, but if they can't it's just one specific thing and there's always sets of rules with shapeshifters, and this one just kind of like is pretty interesting. I mean if you were going to be a shapeshifter, this would be the shapeshifter to be, I guess.

Annika: Right? I feel like in general shapeshifters in lore and such have been at least kind of human shaped in the beginning, they start out kind of human shaped even if they're not a real human. But to have a sentient pile of goo is definitely a testament to the skill of the author, that he can make it so that you feel very very connected to this pile of goo. [Laughter]

Goldie: Yeah. And you're right about shapeshifting being sort of a way- because if you're disabled you try to hide it, there are so many things that you may hide in your lifetime, and so that's a really good comparison as far as, it's great when Homily comes along, because Homily is just so nice and so sweet to Shesheshen, and it's pretty funny because they still talk about like, could I eat this? [Laughter] I don't know if I could eat this person, or like, what's going on there. Even Shesheshen isn't sure in the beginning there whether they could eat this person or not. But she does such sweet stuff and you're just like how you gonna eat that? No, nobody's gonna- [Annika: Right!]

Annika: I almost feel like this book was inspired by the song, "What is love, baby don't hurt me." [Laughter]

Goldie: Yes. Yeah, and I think its honestly, it may be the first time that Shesheshen has felt that.

Annika: Yeah, yeah.

Goldie: I mean she does have family, but they're, well. It's so ironic!

Annika: She ate them all! [Laughter]

Goldie: Because they bit-

Annika: She ate all of her sisters and brothers, so I mean, she had family.

Goldie: Yeah. [Laughter]

Annika: It's like absorbing your twin, yeah, well, absorbing several sisters and brothers.

Goldie: Right? And she doesn't mourn, this monster also does not know what mourning means either.

Annika: Absolutely, yeah. [Pause]

Goldie: Unless of course they'd be, you know, somehow separated from Homily. [Annika: Uh huh] Then they would discover what mourning is, but they've never mourned. [Annika: For sure] Because they eat people, so why would they mourn them? [Annika: Right] That was a snack, like. And the other characters are pretty neat too, there is another cool character in there, it's actually a friend of Shesheshen, do you remember her, blue-

Annika: Blueberry!

Goldie: Yeah, Blueberry.

Annika: I love her, her pretty little blue bear, I mean large, blue bear.

Goldie: Large, yes. But how adorable is that?

Annika: I know!

Goldie: It's like a monster that has a teddy bear for a friend, you know?

Annika: Right? [Laughter] Yeah, it's almost like, well she can't be that bad of a person, she has a pet bear.

Goldie: Yeah! [Laughter]

Annika: So, speaking of characters, I'm not going to name a name because that would spoil a little bit of something, but there is one character that I feel like is a shoutout to a lot of, shall we say monster enthusiasts out there, he's kind of a side character but I found him very hilarious because, whereas everybody else is like oh, the monster, this is terrible, he wants- he finds out who the monster is, he's like, "can you yell at me some more." [heavy breathing] [Laughter] "Can you threaten me?" like. Okay. [Goldie: That is hilarious] That's a shout out to the monster as I said, enthusiasts.

Goldie: Yes, I get that. [Annika: Yeah] A shoutout to the people that buy all of the blue people love story books.

Annika: Mhm mhm. I love him though, he's a very small character but man, he had a big impact on, on me. [Laughter]

Goldie: Yes, that was quite hilarious. And the ending is not what you would think either, so, I'm not going to give it away, just saying, if you go into this book thinking that you know what's going to happen, you don't know.

Annika: [unintelligible] Yeah. [Unintelligible] at all. I would definitely say that I recommend this book, I have been rapidly recommending it to anybody who will listen to me. If you are into good books and can handle gore, then this is a book that you want to read.

Goldie: Yes, it's very entertaining, and even if you start reading it at first and think it's not your cup of tea, I would say just keep going to the next, second chapter, third chapter, just to see, because you'd be quite surprised how it goes. And it's very entertaining, not predictable.

Annika: Not at all.

Goldie: If you want to check it out, again, it is called Someone You Can Build a Nest In by John Wiswell.

[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 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!

[Outro music]