

## *Mutual Interest* Transcript

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.



Amber: Hi I'm Amber, my pronouns are she/her.

Jamie: Hi I'm Jamie, my pronouns are also she/her.

A: Today we're talking about the book of *Mutual Interest* by Olivia Wolfgang-Smith. Olivia Wolfgang-Smith is the author of *Glassworks* as well, which was long-listed for the Center for Fiction first novel prize. She is a 2024 NYSTA slash NYFA artist, fellow in fiction from the New York Foundation for the Arts and lives in Brooklyn with her partner.

J: *Mutual Interest* was written in a style of satire novels from the late 1800s/early 1900s. Think Edith Wharton, Forster and maybe a little bit Dickens. It utilizes an omniscient narrator and it's something that people are very divided on. If you like it, you love it, if you don't it's really hard to get into because it's very heavy on that for at least the first third of the book.

A: It really is. For a while, well, the first few chapters, I was just waiting for the narrator to be a character in the book and then they just never were. They were just out there in the universe being like, look at what these weirdos are doing. Eventually I figured it out but the whole time I was still like, who is this person?

J: And it's really interesting because the style that the author chose was very common for novels back in that time so it's like you're reading a novel about that time period, from that time period.

A: Yes, it's so interesting the literary styles that go in and out of vogue, because I've never read a book like this before. I mean I've read Dickens, I've read books like from that time period. And there definitely is a little bit more flexibility with, like, who the narrator is now, but even if you're reading like travel journals, there's a really good example, where the tone is just so different than what we're used to.

J: So the author took inspiration also from the background of the company Procter & Gamble because the two characters from the story mirror the Procter Gamble joining, because one's a candle maker, one's a soap maker. In the case of Procter & Gamble they married into the same family in Cincinnati and so obviously, like a lot of rich families do, they wanted to keep it all in the family so they joined together for their enormous company. The author decided that she wanted to go ahead and make this more of a queer story, because as you'll know for many books, Forrester excluded, there really aren't representations of LGBTQ characters from that time period, and so she thought, what an interesting idea to go ahead and put a little queer spin on this.

A: I didn't know this information until about 10 minutes ago and I'm just still just gobsmacked. I think that's so funny. When I was reading it, I was like, I wonder if there is a soap company that's like this.

J: Well it's funny because okay it's a book that we had also covered on the podcast. It, was it *Lavender House*, I think? It was a detective story.

A: Oh yeah!

J: Yeah! And that was also, the person who was murdered in that one was the matriarch of a soap making business. It happened to have an all queer family. So it's just it's funny how that has come up numerous times for us.

A: That is fascinating.

J: So the three main characters of Mutual Interest are Vivian, who's the first one that we meet. She is, did she just turn 17, or 18? She's still very young.

A: I think it might have been 16. It was like a big birthday for her. Maybe it was 18. But we were first introduced to her on her birthday when a friend of hers who was a quote-unquote tomboy comes and picks her up with her bike and she rides on the handlebars.

J: From the very beginning that we meet Vivian we are impressed with her tenacity and really just her drive. She's gonna do what she wants to do. So, at the end of the birthday what she has decided is that she's gonna move to New York City, to get away from her parents who, as many parents do, don't quite understand or appreciate their child.

A: Right. Patience is, what, she's having her like coming out into society.

A: Yes, because patience is from a well-to-do family.

A: Yes, and she just sort of like wheels her way into being like her companion for the summer and then like my— Honestly, the gumption. I, the whole time I was like, I could never. But basically she just hops from like rich friend to rich friend to partners so that she can stay in New York and doesn't have to go back to New Jersey and like be with her parents.

J: Yeah. Vivian is exceptionally good at reading people, and very good at manipulating situations, to her betterment. Like what she eventually ends up with one friend Electra, who she shares the bedroom with. Electra is like the journalist for a newspaper. She covers society columns, so Vivian makes sure that she's mentioned in the column and that helps build her relationship.

A: Right. So everyone knows who she is. They're all like, oh who's this mysterious person, but nobody knows that she's just like someone from like nowhere.

J: And then when she's with her next girlfriend, Sophia, an opera singer from Italy, she comes across at a party this man who seems a little bit out of his comfort zone, a little bit out of his element and that's how we meet Oscar.

A: Yes. She met Oscar and she could tell right away that he was also from nowhere. She just like, recognized that in him.

J: And at that point, she just used it as a little teasing, as something to bond with her girlfriend about.

A: She was like teasing him because, you know, that could never be her.

J: And then years later, at this point Vivian is 24, Oscar is 45, and Oscar realized he was gay from back when he was growing up in a small town in Ohio. And he has like been panic-stricken with it ever since, because his grandmother, who raised him, put the fear of God into him. But, because he has not married, he's getting gossiped about. He works in Manhattan for a soap maker that's based in Ohio. He does the sourcing for the ingredients. And so he's also really enjoyed getting to rise in society, because it's so far from his humble upbringing in Ohio.

A: Yes. He's able to be very connected to all different parts of the city to make that possible. I think I remember, he also joined, like, he went into an apprenticeship for the soap maker, because it was the

first thing that would get him out. He was running as far away as he could from the first man that made him feel gay panic, and he ended up in New York.

A: And then in his position as sourcing supplies for the soap maker, he discovers that there is a competitor who is also going for a lot of these same raw ingredients. And that turns out to be Squire, and that's how we meet him. He's the scion of a very old-money, well-to-do New York family.

A: I love Squire. Squire's background is just like, Squire was a weird kid. He liked telling people about the sewer, and as soon as the New York subway opened, he rode it every single day. Squire reads as incredibly autistic. That's not a negative, that's a that's just a fact. He just gets really invested in things, and he got really interested in candle making, to the point where he wanted that to be his business. So he joined up with a candle maker who was willing to take him, because he came from old money, and he could help finance this business.

J: And just to remind our listeners this is the advent of electricity. So, candles were going out of fashion at this point.

A: Right. The candle maker was like I don't know why you're here.

J: And Squire only has interest in scented candles.

A: Yes.

J: Or ones that have some kind of like color change.

A: Right.

J: He wants like something eccentric.

A: He wants like avant-garde candles. And he does not care that it doesn't make any money. He's just like this is what I want to do. This is cool. He's very bad at it though.

F: But Vivian, as the mastermind of this group, is the one who devises a scheme for Squire and Oscar to meet, and for them to have this interaction that leads to joining up their business. Because Vivian realizes this is pretty much the best way forward.

A: Yes. Hilariously, she like, the second time she meets Oscar, she already has this plot started. She's at a party. She knows that both of them are there. She knows about this conflict. And she's like, which one of these people can manipulate into marrying me? And then she's like, you know what would work? Combine their businesses. But you know who's gonna make that happen? Me.

J: And I love how she settles on Oscar, because she meets him, and she immediately knows that he's gay. She's like, perfect, lavender marriage. Neither of us will bother each other.

A: It's great. Oh my gosh. Yeah. I'm still— That's crazy. I love her.

J: And just to say, like, all of the manipulation aside, they really do have a sweet relationship between all three of them, because they really do care for each other. It's a very found-family, perfect kind of scenario.

A: Yes. I want to be clear though Oscar and Oscar hated Squire. Squire was like I don't. Why does this guy hate me? I don't understand. And even when Oscar was like, you're taking all of the stuff I need for my business. He was like, but I want to make candles. And just, oh my gosh. But yeah eventually, Vivian gets them together at a Walrus exhibition.

J: And she kicks Squire into the water. So Oscar has to dive after him. And again, okay, Squire is from a very well-to-do family who hates scandal. And so, then it's just...

A: Yeah, they're— His parents, all they want is for him to just not make the news. They're like, you're super weird. We've accepted that. Just don't make us look weird.

J: Because pretty much they— It's a question of if Squire needs to have more supervision, or if he should be allowed to be an adult in his own right and do his own thing. So, Vivian's design, by putting them all together, Squire actually falls in love with Oscar. And it's very sweet, because then he has these two people who are able to like look out for him. Because Squire is very competent, it's just the eyes of the world at that point.

A: Yeah. He's just very single minded. Like, when he understands something, he seems to really like absorb it. He, later in life, is like subscribed to all these science magazines, because he's just interested in the world in a way that was not super common for, you know, sons of well-to-do families. So he's not, he's not dumb. He's just not interested in what everyone thinks he should be interested in.

J: Such as social moors.

A: Yeah, such as social moors. He goes to a family Christmas party, he wants to tell everybody about the sewers. And if he can't he's going to run out in the snow, I guess.

J: So those are our three main characters.

A: So something that's, we talked a little bit about the style of writing in this book already, that it's a little bit like funky. One of the things that I really enjoyed was the way that the author would occasionally wrap back around to this weird little like info tidbit that she dropped at the very beginning of the book. She was like, one time there was this mountain that exploded because they didn't know it was a volcano. And then it created a small winter. And then—

J: There's a year with no summer.

A: There was a year with no summer. And that was where, was when Oscar's grandmother was growing up and all this stuff.

J: I personally found that a little confusing. I thought the author was trying to make some point about this, and how related to the subject, how it related to the characters. Did you understand that though?

A: I was, the way that I read it was like, was like a butterfly effect. Like, this thing happened that these people probably don't even know about, and it's still affecting them. It's a point in time, sort of like the Vivian sitting on Patience in Sandals bars is a point in time, when Vivian pushes Squire into a walrus pen. That's a point in time. Also, I don't think she ever tells anybody that she did that. They're really just like, Squire's just clumsy sometimes.

J: Well and then later on, Squire remembers it as, he had to jump into the walrus pool to get Oscar to notice him.

A: Yes. Yes. Oh my gosh. Vivian really did have them wrapped around her finger. But yeah, they create this like very, very sweet family. Obviously, not in public but like, Squire refers to them as his spouses. Vivian refers to both of them as her husbands. Like, it's so sweet. I was just, oh my gosh, it just made me really happy. Every time one of them were just like, yeah my two spouses, because even though Vivian was not in love with either of them—

J: They were family.

A: They were family. They like, had this really adorable dynamic, and I just liked it so much.

J: So, from the outside world, their dynamic looked like this heterosexual, age-gap couple, who just happens to have their wealthy bachelor friend live with them.

A: Yes. But they had their house like, designed so that you wouldn't see them when you first got into the room. Very sneaky.

J: Yeah, Vivian made sure the doors were hinged so that the door would open into the room, so that it would give the occupants of the room notice to spring apart if they need, to a servant coming in. And the way it was designed, they even had this like secret passageway. So, it had two wings where, theoretically, Oscar and Vivian lived in one, and Squire in the other. But anyways, yeah, it worked out very well for all concerned, mostly because it was enabled by Squire's huge amount of money.

A: Yes. It did really help that Squire was from a rich family. And like, as part of Squire's attempts to get out from under the thumb of his parents, his parents were like, we will fund whatever you ask us to as long as these people take care of you. Like, they were just like, those two, they'll keep you out of trouble.

J: Because Vivian and Oscar kept Squire socially acceptable. He was turned into this person who would spout only about his, like, you know, private interest to anybody. Somebody who was a little bit more adept at seeming like everyone else.

A: Yeah. I also thought it was interesting that even though Squire seems to be this like, really impulsive person, he seems to still understand that he can't do those same things in public. Which, I'm not sure what I feel about that. I just, I did feel some type of way though. Because this is this very sweet person who like, all he wants to do is tell everybody about all the things he loves, and in public he just has to pretend that Oscar is just some guy.

J: Which, I think all of them have a little bit of frustration with. Especially at events, where there's a lot of people that they have to interact with, and they have to be separated. But for all of three of them, in each other they found somebody who accepts and celebrates them as they are. Somebody who really sees them. And none of them had that with their families. And so, it's just really lovely that they get to have that kind of support so close. But, talking about social events, Squire's money, we want to talk a little bit about capitalism and its role with the book and with each of the characters journeys.

A: Yeah, one thing with Vivian is that she was determined that even though she came from these humble backgrounds, that even if it wasn't super obvious to everyone outside that like, she was in control of her life, and she was in control of this company. After she got Squire and Oscar together, they were the CEOs of the company in name only.

J: Yeah. Vivian is the one who ran that ship. She was the one who sat in Oscar's office every day, and eventually it was just Oscar and Squire who really just appreciated that the company gave them the freedom to step away and really enjoy their lives. Because, they had each other, they had all of their interests. Vivian though, her focus is just on the company. That's like, her deeper meaning in life.

A: Yes. So, yeah, Oscar and Squire had each other. That's what their goal in life was, is just to be together and, but she didn't have that. She had this company, which for a long time seemed to like, be fulfilling to her, until it wasn't.

J: And just to go on a little bit. So, yeah, eventually Vivian was realizing that there was more to life, and how deeply, deeply unhappy just the pursuit of, I don't see the pursuit of capitalism, but the pursuit of money and focus on business, it just ultimately was not fulfilling to her.

A: Yeah, it was a very like hollow victory. And she would, it's not that Vivian stopped like, sleeping with women. She regularly, she like had a whole process.

J: But she made it so she never really bonded or attached to anybody. She kept it very much— Most of them didn't even know her first name. They didn't know her actual name at all. They never saw her actual house. They met solely on her terms, and it was only for a handful of interactions and then she moved on to the next girl.

A: Yeah, I think that had a lot to do— I'm not a psychologist, but to psychoanalyze Vivian, her parents were kind of like, all they ever wanted to do was complain. They never had anything positive to say about Vivian.

J: And they always saw the worst in her.

A: Yeah.

J: They assigned the worst beliefs to her.

A: Yes. There was, there was a line somewhere, and I think it was later in the book, it wasn't about her parents, but it was about the Christmas party, about how it's the worst thing to have to pretend to be a version of yourself that doesn't exist anymore. And that's kind of how Vivian, whenever she had to interact with her parents, she didn't even like them very much, but she still craved their approval.

J: And then Oscar, his interaction with capitalism was, he was using that as a way to build himself up because he felt so insecure about his homosexuality. And so, he thought if he could make himself into a success even though he was gay, even though he was from small-town Ohio, he could still be seen as like, you know, somebody to be reckoned with in society.

A: Yeah. But also, I think it's important to note that like, if they didn't have this financial security they absolutely never could have accomplished this. Like, I think we read another book through the podcast, the, oh it's the one with Victorian women who are trying to find husbands for financial reasons. Oh, what is their name? Their names are Beth and Gwen. What was the name of the book?

J: Oh! *Don't Want You Like a Best Friend*.

A: That one! Yes. I knew it was like a title from a song. Anyway, the point is, and remember, when we talked about that one, we talked about how them being in high society was almost like, made it harder for them to be queer?

J: Because they were under more scrutiny.

A: Yes. But this is like the other side of the coin, because they, Vivian and Oscar just couldn't have had this kind of relationship if they had stayed in their small towns. Also, I think it's interesting that most of the people they interact with, like especially the people that Vivian interacts with, she has several paramours throughout this, and with our omniscient narrator sometimes they'd be like, and that's where we leave this person but don't worry, in five years they decide that it's actually easier to just have a husband and they get married and they have a mediocre life but you know what, that's fine, bye, they're not important to our story anymore. Because yeah, it is especially for women it's just easier to just have the security of having a husband.

J: Well, and I think for a lot of non-straight men throughout the ages too, like, I'm just glad that as for right now gay marriage is legalized here.

A: Fingers crossed.

J: Anyways, and then obviously for Squire, his family's enormous wealth gives him a lot of leeway with his eccentricities.

A: Yeah, I think Squire, in addition to the being queer, Squire does also like, just get away with so much more than most people couldn't, because they're like, well, he's eccentric, but he's also from an old money family.

J: Some of his antics would have got him in jail if he were not wealthy.

A: Yeah. I think he briefly, was he, he was in jail for like a night the one time, right? Because he, they thought he was crazy because he was out in the snow and was trying to get down into the sewer. They were like, you aren't part of that family, what are you talking about? My gosh.

J: Although I can kind of empathize with that. The idea of wanting to run away from a Christmas party where it's overwhelming, and there's just so much small-talk.

A: Right?

J: It's like, yes, I would want to go to a sewer where there's no one else.

A: That was another part, that was another tick in the neurodivergent column. Because when that came up I was like, no, yeah, that's relatable. If I'm overwhelmed in public, I'm like, I actually would rather go into the sewers, thank you. I mean, I wouldn't, I would usually just be like, I'm going home, bye. But like, I get it. Over—, what is it?

J: Overstimulated?

A: Oh, yeah, overstimulated. Overstimulation is a problem for the neurodivergent mind. I still wouldn't go in a sewer though, that sounds gross. But he really liked sewers because of, I think, *Les Mis*?

J: Yes.

A: Yeah.

J: Yes, all of the talk about sewers, and that's why he loved Victor Hugo.

A: Yes.

J: He's just like, yes, talk to me about all of these, like, subplots.

A: Yeah, he like did not care about Jean Valjean. He was like, let's talk about those sewers, though.

J: That is fascinating.

A: Although, speaking of that evening—what is Squire's last name, because I can not—

J: Clancy.

A: Clancy! The Clancy Christmas parties, my gosh. So, first of all, hilarious, I love them. Second of all, like, I will not get into it but like, later in the book a pivotal moment happens in one of them. Mostly I just want to note this, because that is the part where they were like, doesn't it suck that sometimes you have to like, fit into a box that your parents expect you to be in? Like, they expect you to be a younger version of yourself.

J: I think that is, that's true for literally everyone.

A: Yeah!

J: Like if you go back to family gatherings, they're thinking of the person that they knew from like, what, 10, 15 years ago.

A: Exactly, yeah!

J: And that's never easy, especially since like, nobody is the person they were 10-15 years ago

A: And Squire, like, I'm sure, most of us, like, knows that when he's around his parents, and later, when he's around just his mother, that like, there's gonna be things that are overwhelming for him, and that stress him out but he's like, that's not who I am. But, she's still his mother, and he still feels this obligation to care for her, and to see her all the time. Which, like, been there.

J: But again, their found family of three finds ways to make these Christmas parties much more endurable.

25:49

A: Oh my gosh, so there's a scene where the mother is planning the Christmas party, and she's like, yeah, last year I just felt like there was not nearly enough pine cones, and that's so weird, I thought I ordered so many pine cones. And Squire's over there like, and that's because we threw them all in the fire to see what would happen.

J: Because, of course, Oscar, with his background of all of these different ingredients and how they effect—

A: Yes!

J: Was able to say, okay, so this will turn green when you throw it on the fire.

A: Right, yeah.

J: And he was right! And so they would just have fun, pitching stuff into the fire and just to see the color changes.

A: They're like, at some point in this evening, it was a yearly thing, because at some point in this evening, it was going to be too much for everybody, it was too much for Squire to act like his mother expected, it was too much for the other two to act like they were this like perfect married couple.

J: Because these are the kind of parties that like, start at like, dinner the evening before, and they don't end until dawn the next day.

A: Yes, and the public versions of themselves was just too much to hold that whole time, and to pretend, for Oscar and Squire to just pretend that they weren't in love with each other. And so they would find little ways to...

J: Blow off some steam.

A: Yeah

J: And Vivian eventually came up with one of their favorite games, which was: because of Squire's ridiculous wealth, there's an abundance of barely used rooms throughout the mansion, with fun little names. And Vivian would choose a room that would be technically open to the rest of the guests, but she would be keeping an eye out, and then she would expect Squire and Oscar to spend some time alone in there. And it was just, again, a fun way for them to like, kind of like reclaim who they were.

A: Oh my gosh, the scene that, I think it's technically a spoiler so I won't get into it, the scene that like is the pivotal Christmas party, I was so worried—

J: Oh my gosh, yes.

A: —that the mom was going to come in!

J: Yes! Because like, she was trying to remember, because Squire had just told her where he was going off to.

A: Oh, and they left the door unlocked, my gosh.

J: Yes, thank goodness for Vivian.

A: Yeah. Vivian is such an interesting, like, I love Vivian. Like, I really—

J: She is not a girl's girl though.

A: I really enjoy Vivian, but I'm also like, recognize that like, she's a very mixed moral bag.

J: She's all about doing what's best for Vivian. And then, because Oscar and Squire are family, for them too. But like she really is out for herself. She doesn't necessarily care about the best for her employees. She treats them well so they keep working well.

A: Yeah

J: And, with all the paramours that she has, she never really stops and thinks about like, how they actually are doing. She's thinking about them as like, just hit it and quit it kind of thing.

A: Yeah. Like, it's the point where Electra comes up later in the book and Vivian just didn't expect it, like she was getting notes from someone who knew her, and Vivian just forgot about her. She just forgot she existed. So, she was so surprised that this person who, in her brain, was just not important at all, was like blackmailing her.

J: Yeah. Vivian towards the end of the book as she realizes how deeply, deeply unhappy she is with her life, like, makes some questionable judgments, and also like is just not thinking clearly. But, anyways. Yeah, she's dwelling on what had been.

A: And, sorry, again, speaking of that scene, the whole time—I listened to this in audiobook—the whole time I was, like, my jaw was just dropped. The whole time. I was like what is happening? If you read this book, oh my gosh. It's like, pretty close to the end, my gosh. It's such a good book.

J: It is very good. It does not have the conventional ending, so just, something to keep in mind. Usually the books that we feature on this podcast are about nice, happy endings, or—I'm gonna rephrase that. Most of the books that we have on this podcast are chosen specifically because how they portray the lives of LGBTQ characters. Because we want to make sure that we're highlighting all the wonderful things that can happen.

A: And we like to highlight stuff that's like, portrays queer joy a lot.

J: Yes, yes, that's it.

A: We don't want them to be like, tragedies. And we don't want any "bury your gays" over here.

J: Oh, god, no. There's too much of that already, in TV and movies. So, anyways, this one doesn't end horribly, it just is not necessarily a conventional ending.

A: No, it's a very, very bittersweet ending, for me specifically. I don't know how other people are gonna read it. I was, oh my gosh, I was so invested in these three people, at the end I was literally crying. Especially because this narrator, I'm not gonna say stupid, she's brilliant, this narrator like, does that little thing where after we're done with a character, they're just like, okay, dismissed, here's two sentences for how they spent the rest of their lives. And she just didn't do that for one of the characters, and it made me very sad. I was like, but I want to know if they're okay!

J: But it's also in keeping with that character, so, yeah. It's not satisfying as a reading, but at the same time, it's just like, that's understandable. It's an understandable decision.

A: But yeah, overall, I just loved this book. I do understand why some people would not be able to get over the narration style, but honestly once you lock into it and you're like, this is what's happening, I had a great time. I thought it was so funny. Because of the style of narration, the narrator also had the chance to just drop really funny lines in sometimes, and like, be like a little bit quippy and like, slightly insulting to the characters when they were being stupid, and just—

J: Kind of loveably making fun of the characters.

A: Yes.

J: Because it was always said with affection.

A: Yeah, it was definitely affectionate. But no, it was really good. Olivia Wolfgang-Smith wrote another book called *Glassworks*, and I haven't read it yet, but as soon as I finished this book, I was like, what else has this person written?

J: Yes, I'll be interesting to hear from you if it's like the same kind of style.

A: Yeah, I'm very intrigued. I also feel like we keep hitting books that like, have a weird subplot that I just never would have been interested in. Like, this one has the soap making business. I didn't know anything about soap making. We once read one that had to do with like, it was a fantasy world but it was like, currency fraud.

J: Yes! Yes, oh my gosh, I'm, something...

A: Oh, yeah...

J: Gold and Iron? Oh, god. But yes, yes I remember. Yes, that was also super sweet.

A: And that one I was like, oh my gosh what's gonna happen with this fraud? Are they stealing the coinage of the realm? What is happening? Yeah, and this one I'm just like, oh my gosh, soap making.

J: Which, I really love that she chose to focus on that, because, think of how many people kind of built their wealth from that kind of thing. There was Madam C.J. Walker, there was Helena Rubenstein, Elizabeth Arden, and those are like all from around the same time period. Because, as Oscar notes, like—

A: You always need soap!

J: Thank you guys so much for joining us today. Definitely consider picking up a copy of *Mutual Interest* either from a local bookstore, or from your local library, if historical fiction is something that you enjoy.

A: Yes, definitely. Be prepared for it to be just a little quirky, but, I would highly recommend it. I keep trying to get people to read it, with the caveat that like, you might find the narration weird but like, please read this book.



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