

Library Staff's Formative Reads Transcript



Jamie: Welcome to Reading the Rainbow, a roundtable discussion where we're just going to be talking about books that have been formative for our experiences. I am Jamie, my pronouns are she/her.

Ben: And I'm Ben, and my pronouns are he/him.

J: So Ben, tell us, what were some of the books that had an impact on you?

B: Okay, well, I was thinking back to—I was trying to go through my life timeline of reading queer books. Because early in my life, I would have avoided these types of books when I was, you know, I hadn't come to terms with myself or whatever.

J: Because we both came from like very conservative, religious families and backgrounds where being gay was not an option.

B: And reading anything like that would have just made me feel so uncomfortable and like, yeah, kind of icky. So the first book I remember reading that featured like a gay character that didn't make me feel weird, was this book called *Gilda Trillum, Shepherdess of Rats*. And it's written by this guy named Steven Peck, who is a Mormon guy, but he's an evolutionary biologist and ecologist and like a conservationist. And he writes really interesting books that kind of take a more nuanced view of the religion that I grew up in, which was Mormonism. So he's a Mormon guy, but his books, they're like Mormon characters who are a little bit less black and white about things. So the protagonist of this book is a lesbian woman, who's also like a lapsed Mormon, who is like, just a very fascinating person. The thing that really was impactful to me about this book, there was one part, she ends up becoming like a prisoner of war in Vietnam.

J: Unexpected twist.

B: There's so many unexpected twists. It's a wild book. But yeah, she's like, there's parts where she becomes a nun in this like cloistered whatever and becomes like a famous painter. She's like a famous badminton player for a period of time, but then she loses her hand in an accident.

J: She lives a life.

B: It's a crazy story, but it's awesome. But then she ends up being taken prisoner of war. And in the cell, she has a vision of a goddess mother, which is part of Mormon belief, but it's not something they talk about a lot, that there is a mother in heaven as well as a father in heaven. And so there's like this divine femininity that they don't like people to really talk too much about, but that they believe exists. So it was cool that this book, rather than having like a vision of God, it's a vision of this feminine figure. And the woman comes down. Gilda has had this kind of girlfriend, but they don't call it that, named Babs. They're like in love, but they keep it very quiet and they don't, quote unquote, try to shut it down anybody's throats or whatever. Well, this goddess comes down into her room and Gilda's like overcome. She's starving and being mistreated in the war camp. And she asks the woman, “will you please just take me with you? I don't want to be here anymore.” And the woman's response was, “what would Babs do without you here?” And that was so meaningful to me to imagine this divine figure validating and supporting this queer relationship, especially since the book is in this kind of Mormon universe that I was still living in. It was a really meaningful little story. It was really cool to read.

J: Yeah, that sounds fascinating.

B: Yeah, it was cool. I was gonna say, I don't have anything that was that memorable. That sounds like an amazing story though.

B: It's a cool book.

J: For me, I think the most formative parts were simply just like queer representation in stories. So before I was even out to myself, some of the first exposure I had was we would go to the Seuss bookstore at the beach when we were there. And that were books the entire time, as many people who are affiliated with libraries would do. But two of the books that I got one summer both had queer characters in them. One was called *The Bachelor Brothers Bed and Breakfast* by Bill Richardson. He's a Canadian author. And it was like this very idyllic town set in like an island off of Vancouver. And for me, what made the huge impact was it talked about these queer characters, like they're just other people in the community. There wasn't like a judgment on it. And the queer characters in this story are a lesbian couple who runs a garage, get this, called the Ruby Fruit Jungle.

B: Amazing, oh my gosh.

J: That's awesome. Yeah, a nod to the classic book by Rita Mae Brown of the, oh my gosh, what is that book series? It's like it's a mystery series that she writes Pinkie Pie Brown? Anyways, so before she wrote this mystery series, she had like some books that were about the queer experience. So anyways, the lesbian couple was so much fun because to diagnose a vehicle, they would like read its energy. And then that's how they would be able to find out what they need to work. So anyways.

B: That is cool.

J: Yeah, yeah. So just like, representation like that. And then the other book that I had was by Jennifer Kruse, who's like a really big name author in romance, especially in the 90s. So the book was *Faking It*, and it had this gay couple in it. And it was just very sweet. One was a lawyer, the other one was a drag performer. And it was those kinds of things really do matter a lot. Yeah, even to people who are not up to themselves, like having a depiction of queer people as just people, you know, is so sadly revolutionary, especially like, I'm going to say, sometimes presently, but I mean, much more the, I guess I'd say like the last couple 100 years. Anyways, so there was that. And then there was this collection of comics, I completely forgot about until right now called *The Legend of Bold Riley*. So it was very much she was like an Indian background, that she was like this adventure, and she would go out on all these quests, it was kind of like Buffy-esque, where like, there might be like zombies and other things. I'm not sure she was like pan or what, but I mean, like, she had romances with whoever she felt like. Anyways, so it was, I just had like a collection of those stories. Yeah.

B: That's cool.

J: So those were the ones that were probably formative for us. Can you think of any books that you've read recently that have really been like, oh my gosh, this is amazing queer story?

B: One that I just read like last week was the new TJ Klune book called *We Burned So Bright*, I think it's called.

J: Yeah, and that was the sequel to *House by the Cerulean Sea*?

B: No, that is...

J: He puts out a lot.

B: He puts out a lot of books. *House by the Cerulean Sea*, what is the sequel called?

J: Oh my gosh.

B: I don't remember. I love those books. But this one is just a standalone, it's very short little novel that is, there's a black hole coming toward Earth. And so everything's about to be over. And there's this old gay couple that are taking a trip in their RV to fulfill a promise, I guess, that they made. And it was so sad, but it was so cute. I love everything TJ Klune writes, but this book specifically. A lot of his books are kind of like, that they feel like—

J: Fairytale for adults?

B: Fairytale and like kind of rom-commy even, like they're pretty lighthearted. And so this one was surprising because it was really heavy and like, a little bit more intense, I don't know. But these two guys—I don't see a lot, or I haven't read a lot or seen a lot of movies or anything, where the gay characters are old.

J: Yeah.

B: That's like pretty rare, I think to just have gay people who have like lived a whole life together. And so this married gay couple, they've had their whole life, they've lived together. So there's a lot of things that I've just never seen in gay characters where they're reminiscing on their life. They like, talk about things that we're used to, like they talk about AIDS and stuff from back when they were young. But it was cool to just see representation of queer people who have also just lived a whole life in a relationship with each other.

J: Yeah.

B: It's really cute. And I don't know if I've ever seen that before. But I loved it. It was so cute.

J: That's a really good point. Couples that have like spent a lot of time together. I think you see that more maybe with like lesbian couples.

B: Oh, maybe. And I haven't read a lot, still, queer stories. You know what I mean?

J: I was gonna say other ones that had kind of made an impression on me. Armistead Maupin's *Tales of the City*. Oh my gosh!

B: You've recommended this to me! I still need to read this!

J: Oh, it started out as a column, I'm gonna say in the San Francisco Chronicle. And it was this queer man writing. I'm not sure if he like based it on people he knew, but it was such lovely, fully developed stories, but also like had that kind of like sunshine beams through them that made them feel the best version of life that it can be. But I mean, like he still touches on things like the AIDS crisis, beautiful writer, and just—

B: It sounds awesome. I need to read this.

J: Yeah. And then I was gonna say another one that I've enjoyed lately is, okay, a lot of books are no longer being published in the mass market paperback format, with the exception of romances. And that was like a big thing growing up. Lots of paperback romances, and a lot of girls would get their first experiences finding a stash in their mom's drawer or somewhere. But oh my gosh, I'd always wanted to read like a sapphic romance in paperback. So Olivia Waite has done multiple ones. I remember one that kind of like scratched that itch for me, and I'm like, oh my gosh, I feel like my needs are being met right now, was *The Lady's Guide to Celestial Mechanics*. So...

B: Cool.

J: Yeah. Because it was talking about like astrology and all that. Anyways.

B: There's a real theme of—

J: Astronomy. Oh my god.

B: Astronomy and queer mechanics.

J: Yes!

B: And like working on cars. It's pretty cool.

J: I had not even realized that. Oh my gosh.

B: That's awesome. When you were talking about *Tales from the City*, because I heard the book from you after I had heard of the TV show before. And so I didn't realize it was based on a book. But that reminded me of something that I read in high school that I hadn't thought about until right now, was the play *Angels in America*.

J: Oh my god.

B: And then I saw the HBO version, like the TV version. But I read that play in high school in like a theater class that I was in. It was wild to read. Because again, I mean, a lot of it is based in Utah, where I grew up. But that book, I mean, it was a play. But that blew my mind. I mean, that was a wild thing to read. And so like, intense and sad, but like funny and relevant to my life, you know.

J: And actually seeing like depictions of queer people.

B: Yeah. Something that I was thinking about is that I discovered later in my adulthood. I love Shakespeare, right? And like Christopher Marlowe and Ben Jonson and those like John Donne and Edmund Spenser. I love reading like old, old poetry and theater. And I have like since high school. And what has been cool to me as an adult now is reading some of those things, and just the more frequent and more abundant queer scholarship around these things that has become easier to find. There's a book that I finally came across and read called *Shakes-Queer* that has one essay per play, but it reads it through a queer lens, and it kind of like finds queer themes in each play. And not all of them are like, as relevant to the actual play. Some stretch things a little bit to just like have an interesting perspective. But that was really cool to read, and introduced me to—one of the plays is *Troilus and Cressida*.

J: Oh, yeah.

B: And one of the subplots is Achilles and Patroclus, which was so cool. There's a 2018 version of that that you can find online that the Royal Shakespeare Company did, that really leaned into making Achilles and Patroclus like very gay. And it's so awesome. The lines are there. I mean, they don't have to stretch it far at all, because they express a lot of love for each other. But it was cool to just see, I think at this time, how people are able to take those things more seriously, and not like avoid those types of historical queer representations that did exist that like, nobody wanted to talk about.

J: It was so funny, like everybody wanted to force everyone through a straight lens. And it's just, okay, statistically, that's not going to be likely because queer people have always existed. I'm really glad that now it's very common to treat that relationship as the homosexual one that it likely was. It's like, the way they talk to each other. That's wonderful.

B: On a similar note, [laughter] the Christopher Marlowe play *Edward II* is all about Edward's relationship with Gaveston, who was like his court favorite. And in the play, he kind of like drives

things into the ground for the sake of this relationship with this guy. And the court just doesn't respect him and tries to dethrone him because they hate this Gaveston guy that he's so obsessed with. But in a recent book by Stephen Greenblatt called *Dark Renaissance*, that's kind of a very imaginative biography of Christopher Marlowe. Two things. There is a quote by Christopher Marlowe that says, I mean, maybe a quote, it might be misattributed. But he said, according to this quote: "all they that love not tobacco and boys are fools." So anyway, that biography talks a little bit about how Christopher Marlowe was likely, by our definition, queer, if not gay. So I went back and I read *Richard II*. And then I watched the Derek Jarman movie of it. Have you ever heard of this?

J: No, I mean, I know Derek Jarman. He's a famous Shakespearean actor.

B: Yeah. And his movies are just awesome. And he has a movie version of *Edward II* that stars Tilda Swinton as the queen.

J: Oh my gosh.

B: And I'm not remembering the other. Anyway, you should watch that movie.

J: Okay.

B: It's really, really beautiful.

J: I was gonna say, weren't there a couple queer English things? I mean, this has nothing to do now with reading, but I mean, James.

B: There is a whole book that I have not read yet, but it's on my list called *The Six Loves of James*, what was it, first?

J: Oh God, I don't remember.

B: Yeah, it's all about just how gay he was.

J: Trying to think. I really do love and appreciate how common it is now, or how easy it is now to find books that have queer characters, especially as protagonists. One that I've enjoyed recently is a series. I don't know if it really goes into like fantasy. It's more fiction-ish, I guess. Anyways, it's a series called *The Witches of Thistle Grove*. It's about this very magical community in the middle of the country. And it has all these characters, lots of representation. And it's just, it's fun, because it's like, it's not treated as anything unusual. I think that's the part that I really love the most. In science fiction and fantasy, there's a lot more inclusion of queer characters, but they're not treated any differently than the rest of the cast.

B: Yeah.

J: Because yeah, that's not necessarily the case in fiction. A lot of it is more like societal judgment—

B: Coming out stories.

J: Yeah. Where it's rarely pleasant. It's a lot more just kind of focusing on the trauma and the heartbreak.

B: Yeah. A fantasy book that you recommended that I loved was the *Sorcery and Small Magics* book.

J: Oh my gosh, yeah.

B: It was so great. It was like super cute. But it was also just a really exciting story. Like the cool fantasy world. That was a great book.

J: Yeah.

B: I like hope she comes out with a second one.

Yeah. Science fiction and fantasy is where it's at.

B: Yeah.

J: I think that's because probably a lot of the authors are queer too. And so they're just like going to slide these in here.

B: Yeah, the venn diagram of like queerness and loving fantasy and stuff is just awesome.

This has been Reading the Rainbow, a Dauphin County Library System podcast for books by and about the LGBTQ plus community. If you enjoyed this podcast, please follow us for new book discussions.

And if we've piqued your interest in this episode selection, consider borrowing it from your local library. Thanks for listening.



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 you're interested in this episode's selection, consider borrowing from your local library. Thanks for listening!