

Rogue Librarians, Episode 22

This Book Is Gay (Part 2: Close Reading)

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Welcome to the Rogue Librarians, a podcast in which three librarians discuss banned books.

We are your hosts, Marian.

Dorothy.

And Alanna.

And we are the Rogue Librarians.

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Today, we are continuing our discussion of This Book Is Gay by Juno Dawson.

First published in 2014 and revised in 2021, This Book Is Gay was written as a guidebook for young people discovering their sexual identity and how to navigate those uncomfortable waters.

Dawson came out as a trans woman in 2015 and uses she, her pronouns.

In 2016, the ALA awarded *This Book Is Gay* a place on its Over the Rainbow Project book list, which recognizes current quality nonfiction and fiction books that authentically express gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender experiences.

In 2022, the book tied for 10th place on the ALA's list of the most challenged books in America because of its sexual content, sex education, and LGBTQ plus content.

So Dorothy, do you mind reminding us what this book is about?

Not at all.

It is, as on the back of the book, it says it's an instruction manual.

And it covers all kinds of different things about being gay and trans, LGBTQ and plus.

So how to travel if you're gay, how to come out, how to express yourself, how to handle bullies, how to be safe when you travel, just all kinds of different things to think about.

Aside from the nuts and bolts of, you know, so like how does the sex work, for example?

It has useful tips like how to challenge homophobic language or, you know, what the different laws are in the different countries.

So a handy little guidebook, as you called it.

Indeed.

And I just want to throw in again a plug for if you are a parent of offspring that identifies as LGBTQ plus, this would be a terrific book for you to read, to just learn and to consider, you know, maybe a different perspective of what it must be like for someone who's going through something that perhaps you don't understand.

So I just want to put that little plug out there also.

And we'll come back to the appendix later where she explicitly talks to parents and guardians of LGBTQ plus individuals.

Exactly.

Thanks Alanna for reminding me of that.

So since this is a kind of like a textbook or instruction manual, obviously it's a nonfiction book.

Most of the books that we've discussed up until now on the pod have been fiction books.

So we kind of figured that the best way to discuss this one was not to do our usual close reading, but really more to get into the meat of some of the chapters that we enjoyed or that we learned something from, or that kind of just spoke to us in general.

So we're not going to go in chronological order, although I do want to point out that the names of the chapters are really interesting and kind of fun.

And we talked in the last episode about how Juno Dawson really made an effort to try to use language that would appeal to teens.

So the chapter that I want to talk about is chapter six, which is entitled, Hater's Gone Hate.

And the reason this particular chapter stood out to me amongst some of the others is, I suppose it was the chapter in which I really learned something new, specifically because it really goes into details about what are the travel implications if you travel abroad when you are LGBTQ+, and particularly if you're traveling as a couple who are LGBTQ+.

It also goes into religions and how religions have historically responded to people who identify as LGBTQ+.

The chapter kind of starts with a history lesson, which is always an important thing to consider because as we've discussed in previous episodes, politics and cultural values, acceptances of differences kind of go in cycles.

We've talked about the kind of cycle that we're currently in where so many books are being challenged and banned.

And so I thought it was really valuable that Juno Dawson sort of started out this chapter and really kind of pointed out, you know, it hasn't always been the cultural norm in all countries of the world for people who are LGBTQ plus to be hated or othered.

And specifically, Juno Dawson refers to Sappho on her island, the same-sex culture of the Greeks and Romans, and you know, that all of that changed when Christian missionaries started to come into some of the countries, you know, other countries around the world.

So just keeping that in mind, I think it's important to note that things have not always been a certain way, even though we only have the history of our lifetimes to reference.

But if you look at things from a historical perspective, I think it's important.

So that was one thing.

Also, I think it's important to note that some laws have been on the books, specifically male homosexual behavior, which was considered illegal in the United States, specifically before 1962.

And the fact that it took until 2003 in 14 states for the laws of sodomy to be invalidated by the US Supreme Court.

So that was kind of an interesting history lesson for me.

As I also mentioned, travel is a huge consideration.

And this book, this chapter in particular, is like a handbook for travel, specifically on pages 108 and 109.

There are lists of things that are important to know, specifically, and these are in boxes with bold words.

There are countries where neither men nor women can have same sex sex, so where it's illegal, and you can be put in prison or worse.

There are countries in a separate box where two men cannot have sex, but there are no rules regarding women.

There's another box for countries that have, officially have legal rights for LGBTQ plus people, but LGBTQ plus people face persecution nonetheless.

And then there are certainly the scariest of them, the countries that will absolutely apply the death penalty for same sex couples.

And obviously you do not want to travel to those countries.

No, before you go.

No, before you go, for sure.

But beyond that, the chapter goes on and talks about, we need to be activists and how to do that.

So one thing that we can all do is know these facts and boycott going to these countries because tourist dollars bring a lot, that's a big deal for a lot of these countries.

And so if they're not complying with human rights, the way we feel human rights should be represented, then let's not give them tourist dollars.

And there's also a list of organizations, not-for-profit organizations that people can donate to or be part of, be activist with, that's super important as well.

Transgender laws are different.

They're in many areas quite separate from LGB laws.

I'm trying to be very precise in my language.

But like, for example, transgender people in the United States are very much under attack right now.

Juno Dawson mentions this that in the first six months of 2020, and I presume the book went to press after that, even though the United States has laws to protect transgender people, 28 transgender people were murdered in that six-month period because they're transgender.

So it's, you know, even if there are laws on the books that say, hey, you know, you have a right to exist and to be yourself, it's not necessarily safe.

So as Dorothy said, know before you go, know what you need to know.

And then, of course, the rest of the chapter talks about religion and how religions have different views of LGBTQ plus behavior.

So Juno Dawson does a really good job of starting that little section by saying, be careful when you're discussing religion that you never use the word all, as in all Christians believe this, or all Jews believe this, or all Muslims believe this because that's not ever true.

The other thing it mentions is that the sacred texts are meant to be a guide, not a handbook per se, and that they are subject to interpretation.

And Juno gives some really interesting suggestions on how to talk to someone, what to know about what it says in the Bible, so that you have your own talking points if you have the desire to have a conversation with someone who thinks they're biblically literate, and how to say, yes, the Bible says this, but it also says this.

Are you aware that it says this?

And you don't follow that rule, so maybe this is not meant to be taken as literally as you think so.

I love the little box about Leviticus.

It was like, well, yeah, it's pretty straightforward about being gay, but then also it tells you to do all of these other things, like sell your daughters into slavery.

Oh my goodness.

Yeah, the other thing I thought was super interesting is just how the meaning of language has changed over years.

So like what we think a word means, but maybe it meant something completely different 20 years ago or 50 years ago or when Leviticus was written.

So Juno Dawson specifically talks about the words to know, and I use air quotes around to know.

And in our current times, we think that, if a man knows a woman, to know a woman, it means that they know each other intimately, as in they have had sex.

But that wasn't what the initial meaning of the word was.

It was, you know, it's just, it didn't mean sex.

Yeah.

Which I thought was really interesting.

I think it only means, I think it only really means to know means to have sex if you do the appropriate like eyebrow raises.

Right.

Or wink winks along with it.

Yeah.

So those are the takeaways that I had and reasons why I found incredible value in this book.

A lot of it was just right there in chapter six and very eye-opening and informational.

Yeah, I agree, Marian.

I especially thought the religion section was really helpful and interesting because I've heard different responses that you can have to what people say if they say, oh, but it's in the Bible.

But this laid it out very clearly and it tells you exactly what you could say in response to different quotations.

And as you said, emphasizing that the Bible has been translated and interpreted in so many different ways over the years that, I mean, it says, how can you possibly take it literally?

But some people do.

So then you have to figure out how to respond to them.

And if you should, respond to them.

I have heard a bishop in my Episcopal Church basically explain why Sodom and Gomorrah is not about homosexuality.

So it's not just lay people who are interpreting this differently.

There are a lot of different religious factions that also are more inclusionary and interpret that in a different way.

All right, well, we could get way in the weeds with the religious discussions.

So I'm going to move on to something a little lighter.

My chapter that I particularly enjoyed was chapter eight, Where to Meet People Like You.

Thanks First of all, I love the name of the chapter, just because it doesn't say where gay people meet other gay people, right?

It's like, where to meet people like you.

And most of what I love about this chapter is that it really could apply to absolutely anybody.

But first, also, it gives me an opportunity to mention that when Congress was discussing the book banning in, I think it was in September, they described this book as, and I'm not quoting here because I am using my very faulty memory.

Basically, they called it like a book on how to meet up on Grindr for gay sex.

And so I was looking for that, and Juno is so very careful to go over all of the ways that people get in trouble.

So let's start from, I'll kind of go chronologically through it just a little bit.

What I really liked about the chapter is that it made clear that there's no one type of gay or trans person.

There are as many ways to meet other gay or trans people as there are for straight people to meet one another.

So it's, you know, it's not like, oh, here is the secret to how you go out and meet gay people.

It's almost just like, hey, young people, you're going to have to go out there and into the worlds if you want to meet somebody, right?

Gay, straight or anywhere in between.

I love the little sidebar about flirting.

Yeah, because, you know, that's also universal.

And when you're young, it seems so much harder to figure out what people's signals are, right?

We've done studies that that young, you know, the younger people, mostly I've looked at the middle school ones because that's that's the age that I teach.

But, you know, they don't interpret facial expressions very well.

They're still learning all of that.

And I don't know at what point I presume that that kind of goes on into your early 20s, you know, as you're learning what people's faces mean.

So I loved that, you know, make eye contact and, you know, see if they look back.

If they hold your eye contact, then they might be interested.

Are they physically touching, you know, your shoulder or whatever in a non-sexual way?

They might be attracted to you.

So I thought that was that was very cute.

So all of that came before even discussing anything about the quote unquote gay scene, which, you know, like like gay clubs, for instance, even before getting into where those places might be found, Juno focuses on the fact that not all gay people have any interest in them at all.

So far from trying to talk people into going to these places to, you know, like like being alleged by people who want to ban the book.

It's so careful.

The book is just so very careful about, you know, this scene is not for everybody and it might not be for you.

There's plenty of gay people that are elsewhere to be found.

But here here's the places that are out there.

So I really liked that approach.

Same thing when it came to the dating apps.

The advice was really spot on.

You have to be 18 right up front.

Be super clear about your intentions.

Use an accurate photo of yourself.

You know, don't share any dirty pictures.

They're actually not even allowed even on the apps that are just for hooking up.

And also pointed out that the apps that are for hooking up, people don't always only use them for that, which is why you need to be very clear about your intentions.

And then, of course, it's always okay to say no.

Even after you meet someone, you've not signed a contract of any kind.

You can still walk away.

So I thought that was all great advice, and very much not what people are making it sound like.

So that's why I wanted to talk about that chapter.

So I will just close my section with the tidbit about who pays on a date, the thing that I learned, right?

Who pays on a gay date, I think, is what the little box says.

Who pays?

And I loved the quote, generosity is mega sexy, so I think it's always nice to offer to pay, end quote.

And as always, that could go for anybody, you know, as a woman, I'm not under any expectation that a man should have to pay.

It's nice when they offer, but I might want to offer too.

I just wanted to pipe in and say, you know, we're in a post, well, we're in a post-pandemic shutdown world.

I don't want to say a post-COVID world, because clearly COVID is around to stay.

But we're in a post-pandemic shutdown world.

And I think the COVID lockdown time led to a lot more people looking into online dating than ever before.

And, you know, there was a loneliness and we were all isolated and people reached out.

And so I feel like these pieces of advice are apropos to literally every human being who ever looked at a dating site or, pardon me, considered a dating site, just because not everybody thinks of these things.

And particularly if you're not someone who is savvy about using the internet or social media or aware of how those things get out there and they're out there forever once you put something out there.

You know, this is almost like a digital citizenship kind of a section, you know, how to be a good digital citizen.

So I just want to throw that out there.

Also, you know, young adults might be super tech savvy, but they don't always think through repercussions very, very far.

So, you know, they may know how to keep themselves safe in some ways, but not in others.

I think that's absolutely true.

Yeah.

Alanna, did you have any thoughts on that?

I'm ready to just move on to the next chapter.

So the chapter I wanted to talk about is chapter 10, called Nesting.

And this chapter takes place after a chapter that describes gay sex in more detail, and that comes in between the chapter that Dorothy just talked about and chapter 10.

So in the chapter on gay sex, there's a content warning at the beginning, and it says if you're not old enough to read this, you know, just skip this section and go on to the next.

And for someone who is questioning their sexual orientation or wanting to learn more about themselves or others, I thought chapter 9 was very helpful, and one of the points I liked most was at the very end, and she says, quote, This chapter was all about sex, not intimacy.

You can't find instant intimacy in a dark room or on Grindr.

And skipping ahead a little bit, it says, Lots of LGBTQ plus people don't even have sex but can totally identify as gay, bi, or straight because of who they seek intimacy with and who they love.

By all means, enjoy sex, but if you go looking for sex because you're hungry for sex, for love, you'll starve, an end quote.

So I thought that was a really great point and could be true for anyone no matter how they identify.

So sex is not the same as love, and that shows up in the middle of the page.

Sex does not equal love.

But, you know, love often goes with sex, and Chapter 10 focuses on, as it said, nesting, and having intimate relationships with people, and growing with a partner.

And I thought it made several really helpful points for young people, no matter their gender identity or sexual orientation.

One of the things that I appreciated about the chapter was that it does not assume that monogamy is the best choice for everyone, nor does it assume that having open relationships or multiple partners is the best for everyone.

Instead, it points out the pros and cons for monogamy, and it goes into those in quite a bit of detail.

And it says if you decide to have an open relationship, there are certain rules that people tend to follow, and it explains some of the rules, like safe sex only, never in the home, no last names, no kissing, et cetera.

So it says that people choose what rules work for them if they decide to do that.

But throughout the book, and especially in these chapters, it emphasizes that safe sex is incredibly important.

And I think repeating that is a helpful message for anyone, but especially young people who are learning all about this.

Another thing I appreciate is that it discusses gay marriage and babies in more detail, and it makes it very clear that marriage and having children should be available to anyone who wants to do them.

And it celebrates the fact that gay marriage is now legal in America and Canada and the UK.

And it does not talk about other countries, but since we said this is an American edition, it makes sense that it focuses on those places, and Dawson is British.

And it says if you want to have a baby, and you are in a relationship where you are two men or two women, then here are some of the ways you can still have a baby.

And it not only describes those, but also provides the perspective from one particular person.

So I thought that throughout the book, seeing other people's perspectives is really helpful, and in this section too, it's nice to see what other people think about love and relationships and marriage and having children.

So it does not say that there's one way you have to do any of these things or any of them, but if you want to do them, they should be available to you.

Absolutely.

I like that in terms of this being kind of a stand-in for sex education that isn't happening for LGBTQ+, nesting is something that, again, all kids could benefit from having that be part of the discussion, having relationships be part of the discussion.

And it's been a long time since I've looked at what the curriculum is, but I don't think they go over that much.

I totally agree with that, Dorothy.

And that was something we talked about in our previous episode when we were discussing some of the context for this book.

Dawson emphasized the fact that in at least the British education system that she was a part of, building intimate relationships was something they talked about.

But that is not necessarily something that's part of our curriculum in America.

And it's also not necessarily something that people are going to be talking about at home or in other places.

So talking about the importance of intimacy and the ups and downs of relationships and the benefits to having a relationship when you're younger and figuring things out, because you're not necessarily going to end up with your high school boyfriend or girlfriend or whoever.

But it's a learning experience for you, and that's always helpful.

I think that's a really important point, Alanna.

Because I'm thinking about how many kids I've taught who pretty much told me that they learned everything they know about intimacy and relationship expectations from watching television shows or movies.

And you think about some of the TV shows that you've watched or movies that you've watched and how most of them are not very realistic.

I mean, that's part of the whole entertainment factor.

I mean, some of them have some good things, but that just shows me how much more vital a book like this is for everyone, for everyone to be able to have a guidebook to marriage and intimacy and relationships and expectations.

If Dawson wanted to, she could write an entire book just on relationships, you know?

And that's one of the things with this book is it's amazing how much information she fits into it.

But for any of these topics, you could write an entire book about it.

So it doesn't go into as much depth as maybe you would want for certain subjects, but it's a starting point.

And you can always do your own research or find other books that go into these things in more depth.

I think that's true.

You know, things change so rapidly these days.

But I would love to have a young person get with Juno for the next edition and see what are the things that they would add.

I would imagine it's very different from the kinds of things that we are used to when we discuss relationships.

Nothing in this book was particularly surprising.

I did learn some things, but nothing was like, oh, is that what's happening these days?

I think that would be a fascinating version of this book to read.

Especially because it mentioned that the survey responses are from 2013.

It's been a while since these people were surveyed, and a lot of them, I would say, some of them it doesn't provide their ages, but a lot of them are in their 20s or 30s when this is happening.

A few in their teens, but a bunch in their 20s or 30s.

And so, yeah, I mean, I think, as you said, having another edition or a sequel with more input from young people would be really interesting.

Yeah, yeah, I think so.

Alana, I thought that your discussion of Chapter 10 and nesting really kind of lent itself to just a quick comment on Chapter 3, which is entitled You Can't Mistake Our Biology.

And this was filled with a bunch of gobbledygook, and I'm using Juno Dawson's words about science.

And Juno Dawson specifically says, I am not the expert here, but on page 50 and 51, I think these are the most important takeaways.

Juno Dawson says on page 50, what have we learned?

Okay, that was a whole lot of science.

I hope you feel cleverer.

I certainly do.

I have summarized about 100 experiments and studies over the previous few pages.

There are tons and tons of research papers and books you can track down.

If you want more information on this, it is fascinating.

But basically Juno Dawson's takeaway from it is, you are who you are, you fancy who you fancy, and you don't have to apologize for this.

You were born this way.

And then page 51 has just the cutest little cartoonish figure illustration that says, things that did not make you gay.

And it just goes, it's hysterical.

That's cute.

Musical theater, the Illuminati, sharing mugs with gay people, seeing gay characters in books or films, and so on.

It just, it has things that people have said, and also the ludicrous.

But I think that that is really just an important part of this book, too, because as one of my coworkers once said, and I may have said this before in the pod, and my coworker is gay and out and proud and living a quiet life, but basically said, you know, I have loved fairy tales my whole life, and reading Cinderella and reading all the books that I've read with heterosexual characters did not make me hetero.

So reading a book about what it's like to be LGBTQIA+, is not going to make someone who isn't, you know, authentically that, it's not going to make you become that.

So I just leave that right there.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, true.

My little shout out that I wanted to do before we're done is the little build a bridge.

Guidance for Parents is one of the appendixes.

Guidance for Parents and Caregivers of LGBTQ Youth.

And basically, I love the way that she just very straightforwardly addresses the types of, you know, parental objections to being gay.

What are they afraid of basically?

And she goes down the list.

Are you afraid of, you know, of gay?

You have a gay son.

Are you afraid of the what she calls butt sex, which is not how I would say it.

But guess what?

Straight people do that too.

So you would have to worry about that anyway.

You know, gay, gay daughter.

Are you worried about grandkids?

Lots of gay people are finding ways to have families.

HIV, everybody has to be safe about that.

So once again, things that people think only apply to when your kids are gay really apply across the board.

And I love that she just lays it out for the parents.

I thought that was a really helpful chapter.

And it seems like at this point, parents shouldn't still have issues with their children coming out as LGBTQ+, but we know they do.

So this is a great way for them to learn and respond in the best way possible to their children coming out to them.

Yeah, absolutely.

In fact, the whole coming out chapter, fantastic.

I mean, we could have talked about every single chapter.

For sure.

Yeah, I liked the fact that in the coming out chapter, it was like things you should do or shouldn't do when you come out.

And one of them was like, don't come out on the day of your sister's wedding or something like that.

Don't steal the spotlight.

So yeah, it had a lot of helpful things for you to say and do, and I thought that was really helpful too.

Yeah, and I just want to add, you know, and don't out someone else.

That's something that I've learned as well.

You know, just because someone came out to you does not mean that it's your right to out someone who came out to you.

That's their right to do, not you.

Right.

And that was something Dawson brought up in the parents' appendix, I think, was if a parent suspects that their child is LGBTQ+, should they say something about it?

Should they bring it up?

And there were a couple of responses from people in the surveys, and at least one of them said, I would have appreciated if my mother had asked me directly about this, because instead we just danced around it for a few more years.

And someone else said, no, I absolutely would not have wanted my parents to ask me before I was ready to say it.

So I think there are different ways of thinking about it for parents, but definitely not outing someone else is, yeah, you should never do that.

Yeah.

I had a conversation with my child about somebody that they grew up with and the question came up around whether or not this person was gay.

And my kid just said, I'm not, I really can't tell you.

Like I know the answer, but I'm not going to say anything because I said that I wouldn't.

And I'm like, all right, fair enough.

Absolutely.

That's, that's just respect, human respect.

Alana, did you have a quote that you wanted to share?

Yeah.

Since we often end these second episodes for a book with the significance to us, I thought I would end with a quotation.

We've already provided many quotations from this excellent book, but this is one that stuck out to me near the end.

And so I'm going to read the whole paragraph.

Quote, there are days when I think, God, life would be so much easier if I were straight.

But those days are few and far between.

I love being gay.

I love my freedom.

I love making my own rules.

I love that I don't have to keep secrets from my friends and family.

I love being part of a subculture and a minority group.

I even look back on the difficult years at school and feel sorry for how small minded some of my bullies were.

I look at them now and laugh at how sad and tiny their lives are as a result of that.

End quote.

And after that, Dawson also mentions that just because you identify as LGBTQ plus doesn't mean you are only LGBTQ plus.

And it says you are so much more than that.

And it talks about intersectionality and you know, you don't have to just say to people, hi, I'm Bob and I'm gay.

You know, there's so much more to you than however you identify.

I thought it was just a really hopeful way to think about what people have to put up with.

Yeah.

Nice, nice quote at the end.

I love when we bring it back to the thing that the youth need to hear more than anything, which is love yourself.

Love yourself.

Stop the negative self-talk.

You know, be who you are.

And that will be the thing that makes you happy.

Well, thank you, Dorothy and Alana, for another great discussion.

We'll go ahead and wrap this episode up.

We want to let you know, listeners, that in our next two episodes, we will be discussing an oldie but a goodie.

The classic, at least in my mind, Are You There, God, It's Me, Margaret by Judy Blume.

I would love to bring more older, oldies but goodies into the conversation.

So I'm glad we're going to do that.

And this book was so important in my in my upbringing in my pivotal years.

So I hope a lot of people still feel that way.

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Finally, thank you to Chris for creating our music, to Heather for running our Twitter page for the last year, which we mentioned in our last episode, we will be discontinuing, and to Lizzie, who has been our sound editor for the past year.

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The cost that we incur in this labor of love to get books out there for all listeners and all readers.

We could not have done this podcast without any of them or any of you.

So thank you for reading with us, as always, because books are meant to be read.