Rogue Librarians, Episode 8

Drama: Part 2 (Close Reading)

Welcome to the eighth episode of Rogue Librarians, a podcast in which three librarians discuss banned books. We are your hosts, Marian, Dorothy, Alanna, and we are the Rogue Librarians. We would love for you to participate in our discussion. Please visit www.theroguelibrarians.com or follow us on Instagram or Facebook @roguelibrarianspod.

So as always we like to begin with a book that we've recently read and I'm going to just jump right over Dorothy and go to Alanna.

Great. So one of the books I read recently that I especially liked was *I Kissed Shara Wheeler* by Casey McQuiston. And I love all the books I've read by Casey McQuiston and this one is a young adult novel instead of an adult novel about a girl named Shara Wheeler who disappears and the main character is trying to hunt down what happened to her and she is um teaming up with two people she didn't interact with normally including Shara's ex-boyfriend to try to find Shara. One reason is because Shara had kissed her before she disappeared and so um sexual orientation is a big question in this book and it is really interesting and you want to find out why Shara disappeared and what happened to her.

Sounds good. Really good, compelling. Nice. Yeah. How about you Dorothy? I am reading a book called *Because I Could Not Stop for Death*, and it is an Emily Dickinson mystery and I was completely sold upon seeing the cover which has the figure walking in a foggy morning and I've also been I have, I'm obsessed with the show *Dickinson* on Apple TV. So like it's timely for me, I'm listening to it. I'm not 100% I'm only you know, maybe a third of the way through. Uh so I'm not 100% sold on it because whatever my expectations were going in based on the cover and the title, you know, I'm expecting something maybe a little paranormal so far. None. But you know, it's implied that Emily has a little otherworldliness about her and I keep wanting there to be more of that. The main character is told by a maid for the Dickinson family, but some interesting things so far is that it is a discussion of politics, pre-Civil War and slavery and slave catchers, you know, play a part in the mystery. So that's you know, that's interesting.

I just visited her house last weekend actually for the first time...just thinking I would love to do. That was so cool. I highly recommend it. They just finished renovating it and it's in Amherst, Massachusetts. Oh my God, yeah, it's so cool. I highly recommend it.

Oh well I definitely need to do a road trip. The book that I've been reading is called *These* Precious Days and it is a book of essays by Ann Patchett. It came out about a year ago in November of 2021. And um as an says in the prologue of this book, which she narrates herself, which is very cool actually because I'm listening to the audiobook. And um she talks about how COVID affected everyone's lives. And normally she does a lot of traveling to make sure that she does her research for her books and it makes them as true to life as possible. Um she decided to write her essays and to compile her essays into a book during Covid. So anyway, what drew me to this book was the cover most definitely, which has the picture of the cutest dog ever. And this dog looks so much like my dog whose name is Toto because librarians have to have literary dog names. But I was completely drawn in by that picture and in one of her essays, I have not finished listening to all of them yet, but every single one I listened to, I think oh my God, that's the best, I love that. And then the next one comes up and I like that one even better. And then the next one comes up. So, um they're amazing. And hearing her actually narrate these essays is terrific, the one that I just finished listening to has to do with her love of Snoopy from Charlie Brown and her dog is named Snoopy actually, no, her dog is not named Snoopy because she felt that that would be too much for her dog to have to live up to. And so she named her dog Sparky, which also comes from Peanuts, but talks about how much she learned from Snoopy, specifically the character Snoopy in her own attempt to become a writer. And of course she went and that's what she starts with a dark and stormy night. And then she talks about how when she went to create to get a master's of fine arts in writing that she was told by her professor you should never start a sentence with it, you should never use the pronoun it. And of course you know then she goes back to snoopy. It was a dark and stormy night and she talks about you should never tell that to Charles Dickens because it was the best of times. It was the worst of times. And um but anyway these are amazing essays and they're very thought provoking and heartwarming and I think everyone should should read this.

As a reminder, today we will continue discussing *Drama* by Raina Telgemeier, which was the fifth most frequently challenged book in 2018 and the seventh most banned book between 2010 and 2019. It was published in 2012 and won the Stonewall Book Award in 2013. And a quick reminder that, last episode, we discussed in detail why it's been banned but it has been banned

mainly because of the gay characters. It's inclusion of LGBTQ+ characters was unusual at the time and it they other people called it sexually explicit and said that it had an offensive political viewpoint.

Just a quick a quick review of the summary of the book. Um The book is called *Drama*, and it is about a group of middle schoolers putting on a play and also their love lives. That's the short version. I think that's sufficient. I mean if you just say middle school the setting is middle school. It is that captures it so perfectly. It really does if you've ever been to middle school, which surely everyone has, or had a child who's gone to middle school you know that middle school is what it is and as a librarian who has worked in middle schools I personally love middle schoolers. Yes you can. Yes. I also love I'm just going to put that out there but no one thinks back to their middle school years as the best years of their lives.

No but you're right that it is much more fun to work with them than I expected when I started in middle school. I was terrified. But I love them and I still have this conversation with them. Yeah every year I'm like but I love you guys.

One of the things I love about them is how much they are figuring out who they are and how much they changed over the course of one year. It's really special to watch. It truly is.

And as having been the librarian in the middle school um the library was such a place of solace for um for a lot of students who just, you know, we're really struggling with fitting in as all middle schoolers do and they would come and just talk to me in the library and I got to know them so well and it was just great to be able to recommend um different books and you know, just it was just great to connect with them and just make them feel special, making them feel special. Made me feel special.

Yeah, well that helps us lead into our first segment on characterization in drama. Last episode, we talked a little bit about how much we enjoyed Callie's character. She's a very strong character, very passionate about theater, very um interested in her friendships. One other thing that I appreciated is that even though her crushes on people are part of the drama of the book, um the book does not and happily for her romantically and I appreciated that because it seemed more realistic than like, oh everything's going to get tied up in a neat bow and now she's going to be with Matt or Greg or you know, one of the other characters who was just mentioned briefly,

right, and I love how resilient she was in that regard and middle school romance for people who don't know people start going out breakups usually within a week and in some cases have a single conversation during that entire time. So, you know, to show it as resilience, I think really helps. I think it could really help most schoolers who are dealing with all the drama being able to say, Ok, plus she sees some of that behavior for how kind of dismissive it is of her and what she wants. Yeah, I mean, she turns down Greg when he's like, you know, he completely ignored her for so long after kissing her at the beginning of the book and he sort of offers for them to get back together and she's like, no, I have more self respect than that. You ignored me, you mistreated me in front of your friends, I'm not going to just go back to you, she doesn't say those words, but she says, but she also doesn't want to play second fiddle when he was hung up on another character Bonnie, who just not portrayed as the nicest human being.

So yeah, I want to jump in and talk about Liz. I love Liz. Liz is Callie's best friend, and she's very artsy and she's the costume designer and um person in the play um from the stage crew, not even stage crew, just from the crew, um but but Liz is fantastic, and the way their friendship is shown is just so like, it took me back to middle school. I remember my middle school best friend and I remember just the conversations we had and how we'd be just boo hooing, you know, at one moment and then just laughing so hard at the next moment and I just love that about their friendship. I love that, you know, even when they have a disagreement, you know, Liz is like, yeah, I can't stay mad at her too long, we have too much history, I love her too much, but I'm going to make her wallow a little bit, you know, like that is just so beautiful middle school and and I really felt that Liz was just completely fully developed, even though she wasn't the main character. Yes, and Liz did not have a romantic interest, which was also, I think important to have characters that were not, you know, it wasn't about every single kid being involved in something romantic and she and Callie would talk about things that weren't just Callie's crashes. So it passes the Bechdel test. Yes. So they were both so passionate about putting on the best play and talking about their techniques and things like that. And also Liz had her fear of the basement, that was very cute that costume closet, can we talk about for a second, was so perfect having seen a few of those things, it was, it was awesome. I love the fact that Callie took her dance dress, she borrowed it from the costume closet. Yes. And she's like, oh, this is the one time I wish that I were on stage instead of behind the scenes. Yeah, yeah, that's the only time I'm jealous when they get to wear the fun costumes.

Yeah for sure for sure. So I'm gonna bring Bonnie back up again because she's the other main female character that we get to know in the book and then and then we can address the rest of the characters. But so every every story has to have the antagonist and Bonnie definitely fits that bill. Um Initially it's because Bonnie is the girlfriend of um of Callie's love interest, Greg. And Bonnie and Greg are having difficulties, they're not they're not talking, we don't know why we don't care why it probably doesn't matter because it's whatever, you know was the latest drama that happened in their lives in in um But anyway, so Bonnie is then um she's just your typical kind of mean girl, she's she's very self-centered um and you know and we don't really get to know why she is the way she is but but we can sort of guess that that you know she's got her own issues and one of the issues we learn is that she's struggling with some of her classes in school and she she needs a tutor um which you know um you know perhaps that's why she has to excel at other things she does including being you know um the most attractive, most desired, you know, person to date and whatever in middle school, it's like a pecking order thing. Um So she was really interesting to me too.

Yeah, definitely. And I thought it was interesting that she wasn't just the antagonist in terms of getting in Callie's way, but she also had asked Jesse her tutor to cheat for her. And that was what caused West, who was then dating her as her costar as well. That's what caused him to dump her and that's what caused her to miss the second act of their last performance. So the fact that she is, you know, in their eyes immoral for wanting someone notes to cheat for her is the thing that completely changes their mind about her.

I liked the way that even though she, you know, she fit a stereotype, uh there it wasn't and over the top bully, you know, like she was flawed in the way that a normal middle school kid might be flawed, you know, morally ambiguous and self centered and not caring about grades as much, but you know, it didn't like take it to, she wasn't doing anything to actively hurt any of the other characters, which I appreciated, she's not bullying, she's not trying to stab any of them in the back or anything like that. She's just being herself or right. And I like that because sometimes I think that it goes too far when normalizes behavior that I and maybe encourages middle schoolers to behave in ways that they would normally those kinds of stories, *Mean Girls* comes to mind because even though I do love that movie um I feel like a lot of the middle schoolers want to be the main girls and don't get the lesson that that's bad and instead uh you know, make their own burn book, etcetera.

Yeah. Yeah, that's true. I also liked the fact that at the towards the end um you know, Bonnie's we mentioned she's being tutored by Jesse but she um is being tutored because she doesn't feel like doing the studying herself. So she's looking for an easy out because of course she's spending her time chasing the guys. And it turns out that in the end um she, you know, they joked about her being in danger of failing, she's now in danger of passing because apparently when Jesse decided not to tutor her anymore, he quit tutoring her. She actually had to study and she's doing very well now. So I thought that was kind of cute to twist, It's not that she wasn't capable of doing it, she was choosing not to do it. So we all have our choices we make.

Well, let's talk about Jesse some more because he is, I would say, the main romantic interest for Callie, at least in the second half of the book. And he and Justin are the two gay twins that we mentioned earlier and Justin, I don't think is fleshed out quite as much as Jesse is, but we see that Jessie and Justin have always done the same things, people have always thought about them together, they've been treated the same way their father expects them to do really well in school and Jesse told Callie that Justin is so passionate about being in the musical, he said, I want him to stand out for once, I want him to have the spotlight, so he didn't want to audition, even though he's very talented himself. And he ends up saving the day later when Bonnie locks herself in the supply closet. Um but Jesse just seemed like the kind of guy I probably would have had a crush on too, because he seems very kind, very thoughtful, he takes Callie to an amazing bookstore that's all about theater and he just goes out of his way to help people. So I really liked his character.

Yes, well meanwhile Justin Justin who is the person who likes the spotlight um and and was very, very talented um and but he kind of expected to get the leading male part because he was so incredibly talented and and then there's the audition and he doesn't get that part and um so you get you get this very humanized version of of a character who has to deal with that disappointment and accept the part that that he has given and embrace that and anybody who's ever been involved in a drama department knows that, you know, these are the things that truly happen um I remember when my daughter started auditioning for plays and um I just sat down with her and I said, you know, this is fine, I'm really proud of you for doing this, but I said if you're going to do this, you're gonna have to prepare yourself for more disappointments than parts in your in your life. That's just the way it goes, even if you become a professional Broadway star, you're still not always going to get the parts. And so I like that that was brought out in the book, the scene when they're walking, they go across the baseball field to so she can make Greg

jealous and she doesn't say that. But um Justin is on top of it, he knows, but I liked Jesse was like why would you want to make, like, he's kind of still a little clueless about the drama that's happening around him, which I think speaks a lot to him. Really not coming out, you know, he's just really not there yet and he's sort of figuring that out as he starts hanging out with the drama kids and I really liked and I liked the way they both just sort of came to her rescue there when there was an awkward moment and it was really part of what solidified their friendship.

Yeah, definitely. I also like the fact that when Justin does come out to Callie when it's just the two of them uh he's like, oh I'm gay, you know, she's understanding that he's gay and he's like, I'm gay, you can say it and it's just very upfront about it. And then she's like, oh, is your brother Jesse gay? And you can I notice it this time, that you can see on his face that he probably, he knows that Jesse is gay, but is choosing not to divulge his secret. So he's like, no, but you can see on his face that he really is not believing that, so, and Callie's like, oh, great. And she has this big smile afterwards. So I agree that I loved the friendship that all three of them shared with each other.

It's up to that person to decide when and to whom they want to come out. Um it's not anyone else's right to do it for them. And um and that just shows the depth of their love for each other. That that um that Justin was able to not divulge that, you know, to leave that to, to Jesse to do. Yeah, definitely. And Jesse was just so thoughtful, you know, just as a human, not even uh discounting Callie's confusion over whether or not he liked her, you know, he noticed things, you see him noticing that she likes that book. Um and he's reluctant to say mean things about Bonnie, even though he feels them and I think he doesn't until he feels like he can trust Callie not to, you know, kind of start gossiping about it. Yeah. Yeah. He's just a really great character. Yeah. Yeah. They are all really great characters.

I love the scene um when they're going to the bookstore and of course um Callie thinks it's a date and of course it isn't, it's it's friends going to the bookstore together. And so both Justin and Jessie are there and she's like, okay, whatever. And then their dad is driving them and and asks the question, you know, are you Justin's girlfriend? And the layers that were going on there. Yes. And then are you Jesse's girlfriend and and of course she wants to be and she's like, no. And then the way her facial features are her little thought bubble of uh Yeah, expressions are so well well drawn. But all the layers that especially in retrospect, after the end of the book, dad doesn't know they're gay. Callie was wanting to think this was a date kids where there was also the

layer of dad, you know, like you don't talk to your parents about your girlfriend. Such the dad was such the typical horrible parents. Everything he said was embarrassing to everything. I never would have I was always accused of embarrassing my kids, but I never would have touched on any of those things.

You know, when I embarrassed my children, I did it on purpose, right? And they knew that. But I mean, you know, every parent who's ever driven their middle schoolers anywhere knows the rules. You're not allowed to talk, you're not, you're invisible.

I did not abide by that rule, but I didn't abide by that either because I was a teacher. So, right. I was like, don't whispering back there, I'm a person in the car. You can't have these little private conversation. Yeah, so, so fun. So yeah, definitely a moment that the grown ups can identify with.

The second segment is on themes and you guys wanna pick one that you found particularly compelling? Sure, I thought the one that struck me the most this time was the idea that you should follow your passions no matter how they may look to others. So Callie doesn't care how other people think of her obsession with theater and trying to design the best cannon. Um, we already mentioned too that she doesn't seem to care so much what other people think about her. And she has pink and purple hair. Yeah. And um, and Liz is also just so passionate about costume design. So it seems like if you are passionate about something, whether it be related to theater or not, you should follow it.

Absolutely. I love the way Callie's parents were very supportive. I don't know if we ever saw Callie's dad in the book, I don't think dad has ever mentioned. So she may not have a dad have one, but her brother and her mom were very, very supportive of her and her little brother when she's moving a set piece onto the stage during the production and he's like hi Callie but I mean the amount of love in that moment, you know it was embarrassing to her but at the same time it was very sweet. It was and I think that's why I guess that's my point is that's why we see Callie as this very unconfident young lady in middle school which is unusual because she's very supported by a loving family clearly now in terms of following your passions.

I thought another important thing was I guess combination resilience and just agency that these characters, you know they were the kids were in charge of that whole production and you know

Callie trying to figure out how to make the cannon do what she wanted the cannon to do and you know characters just taking solving their own problems. There was, I felt it was important just seeing how and I know this this book is 10 years old but middle schoolers today um a common complaint is a they need to be more spoon fed everything which is of course not every kid but you know that they were identifying the problems attacking the problems, resolving the problems all on their own was great definitely.

And going along with that, we mentioned earlier the importance of teamwork and you see that and they're solving problems too, just how willing they are to help each other out in these various situations. That's really great. Yeah, that was really, really cool. I mean, like, you know, when they haven't sold enough tickets and, you know, they come up with a plan to sell tickets and the putting up the flyers and you know, and then picking up another person to work with the stage. I mean, it just was really, really that was neat.

Um I also feel like um you know, the friendship is more important than a crush question is definitely a neat theme here. And and that's man, I just feel like that's so important just throughout life, and for that to have become such a big theme in this book um where, you know, I mean, it's just expressed in so many ways, I mean, Callie and Liz and their friendship is just a beautiful, beautiful friendship. Um and she gets a little irritated at Callie at sometimes, and then, you know, like there's a scene at the at the at the dance where she kind of deserts her for a while, but you know, but inevitably they find each other and they end up having this laughing crying moment, and it's just so cute. Um and then but but what really stood out to me to is is how she was able to maintain this lovely friendship with Jesse even after she had this serious crush on him. Really thought that he had a crush on her back and then to find out that, you know, he's at least bisexual if not gay, and therefore and and that she's not the person he's interested in, that there's another person that is really capturing his heart right now, um but that they can still be friends and very, very good friends even with Matt, who we didn't talk about much, and Greg, who are brothers. Um there is this element of, you know, whether or not they're gonna be angry with each other over this crash, that Matt had a crush on Callie and Callie had a crush on Greg because Callie but though he knew that Yeah, which is so difficult, and they were really more on the side, but I feel like they also, you know, we're exploring that same thing.

Definitely, and I think that's just such an interesting that was another thing that just felt so ordinary and lovely in this book, is that it wasn't it wasn't like that big of a deal, um that characters were gay or bisexual, because there's there's always, sort of that tension when you have friends that are, you know, potentially love interest, no matter whether they're the same sex or different, um I say same sex, but same gender or different gender, it doesn't really matter because, you know, anyone could be a love interest and anyone could be a friend, and there's always that pain when you're attracted to someone and you think, oh, is this a crush and then realize, well, it's not a mutual crush, but we have a lot in common and we're really good friends and that's even more special because crush comes and goes. But a friendship is kind of a long term. But you don't know that in middle school maybe.

And to go along with that, I think it's really important in this book that we see that you should be who you truly are. You shouldn't pretend to be something you're not. And so Jesse eventually is honest with her and it's like, well, I'm interested in West, you know, at the moment. And also it's important to accept other people if they're different, no matter how that difference appears, whether it's in your interest, your talents, your sexual orientation, your gender identity. You see most of the characters accepting others for who they are, I think to a degree, they even accept Bonnie, you know, up until the cheating incident. Um, she's not the nicest person, but she was on the cast and part of the team and she's very talented. Yeah. And they would recognize and admit that. Yeah, yeah, they would. I mean, sometimes the most dramatic people are really good actors for sure.

Should we move on to our final segment? Let's do it. Yes, indeed. So our final segment is talking about the book's significance for us personally, and we get in a few different ways. Starting with a song, book, TV show, movie that it makes us think of. So, Dorothy, do you want to take over? Yes and this very much and then I'd like to put it in terms of like what would I recommend to the characters in the book? And in this case I think Callie as she grows up should read *Simon Versus the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, which if you haven't read it, there's a play being produced which of course is a nice tie-in. And um and it's it's as the title suggests about why should gay people have to come out in the first place? Why is it? You know, straight people do not have to say by the way, I have done some soul searching and I have discovered that I am straight, you know, it's not a thing that they have to do. Uh so why should gay people have to do it? And uh so I just think that she would very much enjoy it. And it was for me the first book with uh with gay characters that I read and truly felt the crush in the same way that I felt crushes in heterosexual

books. So even though you know, I'm open minded and I enjoy reading gay fiction. I that was the one that was that I truly felt it the same way which was a big leap for me.

Yeah, absolutely. Um so I'm gonna cover the question that I would like to ask um the characters and and um, Alanna and Dorothy, you're gonna be my guinea pigs here. But the question that I wanted to ask is um how do you feel about the portrayal of toxic masculinity in in the characters and in the story?

I think Raina Telgemeier does a nice job of portraying it without naming it. So, unfortunately, the behavior that comes to mind is seen as very normal. For example, Greg kisses Callie when it's just the two of them. But the next day when she goes to say hi to him, he ignores her, seems embarrassed by her, basically says, you know, oh I talked to my ex-girlfriend and we're back together. So the way he treats Callie is really frustrating. But unfortunately I think it's something that a lot of people have experienced and the way that his younger brother Matt treats Callie feels toxic too because he has a crush on Callie, she does not know that. And he takes out his anger at his brother Greg by being angry at Callie and saying really snippy things to her and sometimes really hurtful things to her and like, oh well that's cutesy like you know why would someone care about that little um the pin cushion that she gives to Liz and he's just very dismissive of everything Callie does throughout most of the book because he has a crush on her and because he's angry at the situation, right?

And there's even a competition sort of between them that comes, you know, we get that in the scene where he expects to have the stage and you know, to do the lighting and test that out, and she's on the stage painting set pieces and Yeah, that's that's um that's a little conflict. Um Yeah, did you want to add anything to...

Well, we were talking about the dad in the car and um I don't know if this 100% counts as toxic masculinity, but just this sort of assumption that dating is happening, especially in middle school, like I think that's almost never an assumption with middle schoolers, she's not just their friend, she has to be one of their girlfriends. Yeah, yeah, for sure. And then the one for me that stuck out is um is towards the end when um when Greg, you know reconsiders, because now he's decided that um that he's not interested in Bonnie anymore and he, you know, he is kind of saying to Callie while you were you were here in front of me all along and I just missed it, and um and she's just like forget it, I'm not playing second fiddle and then she gets up and she says

I'm going to walk home and he's like, well, alone, alone, you know, I will walk you home and she's like, it's a block, you know, like there's this and you know, that one is really interesting to me too, because, you know, there's this sense of chivalry of, you know, Well, yeah, we should be safe and you know, and you know, men are the protectors. But yeah, there's something about that scene that's like, okay, first, she lives a block away. It's fictional. She's going to be fine. But not that I'm condoning women walking home by themselves ever because, you know, we all know that bad things happen and which is somewhat symptomatic of a larger toxic masculinity in society. But um but I like her independence there. And the fact that, you know, she's just like, I don't need a guy. How about, Alanna, a passage that spoke to us?

So, one of my favorite passages was near the end when Jesse and Callie are reconciling after he basically deserted her at the dance that he had invited her to and she saw him talking to West and she apologizes to him first for blowing up at him. And then he says, Callie, I'm the one who should be apologizing to you. However, it was you who told me to go after what makes me happy and she says that wasn't quite what I meant. So you and West, huh? And he says, well, sorta. West still doesn't know if he's really gay or, I don't know, bi or whatever, really. She says, what does your brother think? Oh, he definitely thinks West likes me. Well, you're a pretty likable person. Thank you, Callie, you've played such a huge role in breaking me out of my shell and if I was going to like any girl, it would have been you. It was so sweet. It is such a sweet moment.

And yet that just makes me cringe because I can tell you if I had a dollar for every time a guy said to me something along the lines of you're so great, you would make a wonderful partner to somebody someday. And I would always be like, you know, because I was always the friend in the friend zone.

I had to say that to a few people over the years. But you know, it's just like I don't know pheromones like either they're there or not...It's true and you know, and I get it, but it's still very hurtful. It is so hard conversation to have; it's crushing. And I think that it's not just me, Everybody has felt that way at some point in their in their growing up and testing out the waters with dating and and yeah, it's painful to be friend- zoned, even though it can become very enriching and probably the best case scenario. But at the time it's like yeah, yeah.

So that about wraps up our discussion for today. In the next episode, we will discuss the book All Boys Aren't Blue by George M. Johnson. Please join us next time for a discussion of why this book has been banned. And, by the way, if any of you listeners have a suggestion for a book that you would like us to address, we recommend, we request, we beg you to please leave us a comment or question um visit www.theroguelibrarians.com or follow us on Instagram or Facebook @roguelibrarianspod. If you're enjoying this podcast, please subscribe on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Stitcher, or wherever you find your podcasts. We would appreciate it If you could leave a rating and review on Apple Podcasts to help other people find us. And, finally, please consider supporting us on Patreon. We are a small enterprise and we need your help to run. Thank you so much for reading with us today because books are meant to be read. Bye!

*Please excuse the typos and grammatical errors.