

The Hidden Bookcase Episode Transcript
Peter Darling by Austin Chant

Morgan

Welcome to The Hidden Bookcase! Come in, have a seat get comfy.

Sorren

It's just next to the studying library ladder, and right below the shelf titled "queer fairytale retellings".

Morgan

Pick a book, your favourite book- that's the one that opens this room. Inside you'll find a warm fire, a loving cat, and a wide skylight to the stars

Sorren

And a really towering to be read pile.

Morgan

I'm Morgan, I use they/them pronouns and I am a figment of your imagination.

Sorren

I'm Sorren, I use he/him pronouns and I am the kraken awaiting your blood sacrifice.

Morgan

We've been friends for 10 years and are always swapping books.

Sorren

But despite having the same taste in books, we never get around to reading each other's recommendations, it's always just another book on the pile.

Morgan

It's a seriously big pile now. It might crush me in my sleep. So each month we're going to force each other to read a book.

Sorren

The new reader will give a blind summary of the book, then we'll both go away and read it, and then when we've both read it we'll return to chat about it.

Morgan

So this week and let's get to talking about...

Sorren

Peter Darling by Austin Chant.

So Morgan, tell us all about Peter Darling.

Morgan

So Peter Darling by Austin Chant is a sequel slash retelling of Peter Pan by JM Barrie. It is a trans retelling where Peter and Wendy are the same person, and Peter is a trans man. And... it's also a bit of enemies to lovers romance between Peter and Hook and just an all around great vibe. I discovered it ages ago because it came out in 2017. And I saw it on one of those Tumblr lists of like, trans characters in fiction. And then it was completely out of print for like years. And so I finally found it when it went into reprint last year and I read it during Freshers week and just could not put it down. I was literally at my table at the freshers stall at uni just reading it whilst there was no one at the table just going: "Need to finish it. Oh my god."

Sorren

Shall we listen to my first impressions? It's like before your first impressions. My pre-impression.

Morgan

Your pre-impression. I'm very curious, I'm very curious to listen to this.

Sorren

So what do I know about Peter Darling by Austin Chant? I think the answer is very little much like Morgan with Dark and Deepest Red last time. I know that it's a Peter Pan

retelling. And I know that it has a trans male character in it because I found it on a list of them when I was looking a long time ago. And I think that quite possibly it involves Wendy and Peter actually being the same person. And Peter- Wendy, like, transitioning and then becoming Peter if that makes sense. So I'm not entirely sure if that's true. That's- That's my guess, I suppose. And I'm looking at the cover, but it leaves a lot to the imagination. It seems like Peter's gonna fly off the Jolly Roger at some point and maybe fight a Kraken? So that's fun. I believe the Kraken might actually be trying to consume Neverland now that I'm looking more closely at it. So that's a lot more action than I... I guess was expecting. I don't really know anything about the plot or the plot beats so I guess I'm gonna have to find out.

Morgan

So we basically word for word, said the exact same thing!

Sorren

That was- I mean, okay, I didn't know about the enemies to lovers aspect. I will say that out the gate. That took me completely by surprise in the best way possible. I did not know that that was a feature of this book.

Morgan

Yeah, I liked your review of the cover. Because this is the reprint cover because it was originally like very blank cover, very like blue and green vibey, whereas now it's got actual pictures on it.

Sorren

Yeah, it sort of has that... sort of old woodcut impression that is kind of evocative of the original Peter Pan which is quite nice.

Morgan

Yes.

Sorren

And I think it's Tink on the "D," in "Darling," the sort of embellished D, which is very cute.

Morgan

Oh, I hadn't noticed that.

Sorren

She's very small. But I think that is her.

Morgan

That's so cute. Speaking of Tink: fairies in this world.

Sorren

I absolutely love how Chant characterises fairies in this world. It's so much fun. I love their weird insectoids vibes, I love their hive mind. It's fantastic.

Morgan

Many eyes, many legs, furry... Literally what more could you want?

Sorren

What more could you want? And I thought that that was kind of an interesting I don't know jumping off from the original in that in the original they have kind of a weird thing going on in the actual text? But not to this extent. I remember they like gendered glows, which I always thought was a bit weird- but they have a non-binary gendered glow as well which is interesting.

Morgan

I did not know- I literally just relistened to it and did not catch that.

Sorren

Do you not remember the gendered glows, Morgan? The most important aspect of Peter Pan?

Morgan

I just remember them describing her as like curvy and very much like "She's a voluptuous woman," kind of vibe and being like, "Okay, interesting choice. Um..."

Sorren

Yeah.

Morgan

"Why?"

Sorren

But making them insects I think was a fun move. I think it's also a very interesting move given that you're getting an older Peter's Neverland, and how his imagination of it might have changed as he grew up.

Morgan

Ooh, that's a good point. The sort of stereotypical fairy description is just "Teeny tiny human woman." There is that sort of trope in fantasy of "It's humanoid but slightly different." "It's humanoid, but longer." "It's humanoid, but shorter." "It's humanoid, but they glow."

Sorren

Humanoid but longer- is that elves?

Morgan

Yeah.

Sorren

I mean, you're not wrong.

Morgan

So I think it's really interesting to be like, actually, let's make them a bit more alien. A bit more other. Let's make them vibey. Let's make them insects. Let's... talk about the gay.

Sorren

Let's talk about the gay. It's extremely gay. One of my first notes is "We are only 41 pages in, and here we have a sword to throat homosexual moment."

Morgan

That's the truly iconic moment. That's the like, "Oh, it's this. It's- it's gay, gay." It's very much the whole like, I feel so much towards this person. It must be hatred.

Sorren

It must be hatred.

Morgan

Like, oh, I just "I hate his so blue eyes. I hate his curly hair. I hate his [meow] beautiful clothes."

Sorren

"His stupid moustache." Also, Chapter 2 has the quote: "Peter took a step forward, liking the way Hook's eyes followed him," and I was like, "Excuse me, we literally just-" this is like the first appearance of Hook. And I do love how like unashamed it is. But it just fully leans into the enemies to lovers trope like this is somebody that's clearly having so much fun with it as an author. And I was having so much fun with it as a reader.

Morgan

It's very much just like, it has that fanfictiony vibe, which we all love.

Sorren

It does.

Morgan

When we have, like, enemies to lovers in literary fiction. It's always very much like, toeing the line? It's almost very much like: "But they're not really enemies," and "Oh, but they'd never really hurt each other." Or there's some weird power dynamic that is just a bit gross. But specifically here, they are on such an equal playing field. And they really- they do understand each other and

like you know, we love a good trope of: "No one else matters in this world." Only its literal. Literally they are the only two people in the world- apart from Ernest but Ernest is just out there being gay on his own. He's fine.

Sorren

I felt a bit bad for Ernest, I was like, well, he's obviously also in love with Peter. There's only two people in the entire world and both of them are in love with Peter.

Morgan

That's another thing I really like. This is very clearly a love letter to being trans. Making the only two real people in the entire world attracted to the main character who is trans and who doesn't see himself as attractive... Like there's that line where Hook is like irritated that he doesn't think Peter knows he's attractive.

Sorren

Yes.

Morgan

I just think that that's so... it makes me feel so many things. Okay, the passage that I want to read, it's when Peter puts on the crown.

Sorren

Yes.

Morgan

And Hook is like, "It suits you, he wanted to say against all his better instincts. The crown made Pan look like a lazy young God, his curly hair spilling out under and over the golden rim. His eyes matched the jewels in their gleaming. Prince of runaways Hook thought, and caught his breath, and look- looked away." Just...

Sorren

That was very good.

Morgan

Just the trope of like, the lazy prince with like the crooked crown... is such a trope in like, especially like YA kind of things of like, very much like, the heterosexual love interest. It's always like, "Oh, this very, like dark and mysterious prince who like wears his crown very jauntily, "and sort of appropriating that and taking that.

Sorren

Yeah, ascribing it to a trans masculine character is a lot of fun.

Morgan

Like this, just this image is very gender, and the fact that he literally is a god of this world, I think is quite fun. Like, I am one who... I do go through AO3 looking at the overpowered tag because I love a good overpowered exploration. I think it's so interesting. And to- to actually like explore that and to sort of have this vibe, and like... just the way that Peter is described. Very gender, very good, very good vibe.

Sorren

I absolutely loved how they continued to play with that, especially as it became more and more clear that Neverland was a figment of Peter's imagination, primarily. The pathetic fallacy coming in later was so much fun.

Morgan

Yes, pathetic fallacy, my beloved. Especially when Hook is convinced for a good like 20-30 pages that Neverland is trying to kill him. And the queen is like, "Hun. No."

Sorren

"No, it's just your boyfriend."

Morgan

"Your boyfriend is just so overpowered and has a great imagination. So he decided that he's in charge of the weather now."

Sorren

But yeah, like stuff like the dream sort of skipping- like the bit where he talks about skinning a rabbit but then he realises he doesn't know how to skin a rabbit

Morgan

Just the way that the world-building is created and like you slowly slip in things like the fact that John and Michael are similar to Slightly and Curly. Slipping little things in more and more to be like, "Maybe something's going on here." The fact that Hook knew the entire time and Peter didn't.

Sorren

Oh, that was also really good.

Morgan

Hook's like, "Oh, sorry to break it to you..."

Sorren

Hook's like "We've just been playing Dungeons and Dragons this entire time. But you- every time I've killed one of your NPCs you've been like, this is a real- this is a real murder."

Morgan

That- the whole murder thing was so interesting to me. The fact that Peter's like "No, the pirates aren't people. No, they're just figments of the story." As soon as one of the Lost Boys is killed, Peter suddenly is like, "You killed somebody."

Sorren

I do wonder if it would surprise people who haven't read the original Peter Pan? Because I suppose people have the Disney version in mind but there's so much murder in the original that I think if people haven't read it... I mean,

this was your first time reading the original as well,
right?

Morgan

Yeah, so I think I read it as a kid and I just do not remember it. Because I saw some reviews on Goodreads being like, Oh, this is so- it's such a disservice to be original, you know, it's very, like, out of character. And as I was listening to the book I was like, it's very in character, honestly. There's so much murder and violence and like, there's this implication that Peter kills off the Lost Boys when they get too old. That's just never mentioned again. Yeah, so that was really interesting to sort of transfer it onto this. And there's honestly not that much murder in this one.

Sorren

Yeah, there's less murder comparatively. But I also thought it was really interesting that it became something that he liked equated with his masculinity. It was like a very... immature, I guess, concept of masculinity like, "Oh, obviously, this is what I want to do. Because this is what men do is like, fight and kill each other and stuff." Whereas there was Ernest and Hook who were like, enjoying Neverland, because they were able to not do those toxic masculinity, things, in that they were queer men who experienced their masculinity differently to what was the norm where you'd y'know, go to your boxing match at the end of the day of being a gentleman to get all of your manly urges out or whatever it was. But because Peter didn't have an outlet for that at all, because he was a closeted trans man, of course, when he gets an opportunity to play with fantasy, he does as much masculinity as he can, which is cramming as much violence in as possible before he's like, "Well, hang on. Maybe this is bad actually."

Morgan

One-One trope that this has, that I am obsessed with, is reintroducing yourselves when you're- when you become on a level playing field, so that you can finally move forward

into a romantic relationship. The reintroducing trope is genuinely one of my favourite things in literature of all time, second only to the "Run away with me," scene that we get in so many queer narratives.

Sorren

I mean, we kind of get that here too honestly.

Morgan

We do! Honestly, it's a one-two punch. I mean, they're so immediately ride or die for each other, which I do- or at least Hook for Peter, Peter's a bit more like, "Hang on a sec, I didn't even know I could be gay five seconds ago. Give me a sec."

Sorren

The reintroduction scene that you mentioned is really touching as well, because you get James introducing himself as James: James Hook. But when Peter introduces himself as Peter, Hook doesn't question it at all, which I thought was really sweet because it's this thing of they are living in this fantasy world and Hook is trying to get information about Peter's past and he wants to go back into the real world by the end of the novel. He realises that, like, they can't live in this strange fantasy for the rest of their lives. But when Peter says his name is Peter, he's not like I'm going to question that further or push for a surname or anything. He just accepts that. And also speaking of tropes, there's a wound care scene. There's multiple wound care-

Morgan

There's mul- Yes.

Sorren

We are two-for-two. We're also two-for-two on scenes where... there's coitus in the forest for some reason?

Morgan

What is it with fairytale retellings and coitus in the forest?

Sorren

I don't know.

Morgan

I have a question.

Sorren

Go for it.

Morgan

If you woke up and you found yourself in a fantasy land
where everything you wish was true,

Sorren

Yeah?

Morgan

Would you bother leaving? Because I'm gonna be honest, the
entire time of the novel when Hook's like "Oh my God, I
need to go home. It stole my whole life from me. I'm like,
"I would stay." Like, it seems so much more chill. Like
okay, yeah, no one else is real. But now, you two are
real. You've got each other.

Sorren

I remember thinking if there's like one criticism that I
would have, it would maybe be that there wasn't enough
appeal put into real life. Like I appreciate that this is
sort of a mental illness metaphor, and an escapism
metaphor, you know, both of them have very self
destructive tendencies throughout. But especially with the
understanding that they're going back to like Victorian
England, and especially with there being a risk that they
might not even be together when they go back, and that
they would have to find each other again. It's just so
dangerous and depressing- the alternative to Neverland.
And I could see that like, okay, maybe Neverland has,
like, no challenges it's that sort of the end of The Good
Place thing- spoilers for the end of The Good Place-
where, you know, if everything's perfect all the time,

then eventually it's just going to become completely monotone. But they have been introducing challenges to Neverland because of the way that it works. If they want challenge, it gives them challenge. They even make a joke about that where Peter says can't he just wish an exit so that they can get out and then Hook says, "That's kind of not really in the spirit of the thing is it?" And then they just keep going? So...

Morgan

You know? And like, I think it's interesting that Hook is so adamant about leaving, because, like, he left the real world because of grief. But he was, you know, an autonomous adult, he had his own house, you know, he could do his own thing, whereas Peter is so adamant to stay because he's never had any autonomy of his own. And they are going back to very different things, and I don't think Hooke quite understands that, that like, the reality that Peter left was awful. Like Netherlands in fact is better than when- where he was.

Sorren

Completely agree with that, especially- you're right with the- the grief aspect of it. You know, hanging around with a weird simulacrum of your dead boyfriend is probably not a good idea for your mental health. So Hook coming out of it does seem like a healthy thing. But in comparison, yeah, what's Peter going to do?

Morgan

At the end of the day Hook is a cis man. Like he has a lot more autonomy in the world.

Sorren

By implication, he's a financially independent cis man with, you know, his own house, his own land, his own career as an artist. He does seem to be far more... privileged, basically, I suppose, than Peter.

Morgan

Yeah. But during their fight scene- not fight but like, because they're not in the same place. But like, Peter is fighting Hook with the weather. So, y'know. But the fact that they go to each other's spaces in hopes of finding each other, like Peter goes to the cave, because he hopes that Hook will come and find him. Whereas Hook goes to the mountain, because that's the only place he can think of that Peter would go. That's true, like, "We understand each other," kind of moment.

Sorren

That was very sweet. I did like that a lot. Speaking of the cave, I also- I just loved Hook's passion for clothes so much. I thought that was really fun.

Morgan

Yeah, he's like, "No, seriously, let's look at these boots."

Sorren

I feel like that's one of those traits that people are hesitant to give gay characters because they are like, worried about leaning into the stereotype that it was just really fun to have a gay man who's just so into his clothes. And it was like, not framed as embarrassing or anything, and, of course, his fantasy would be full of fantastic clothes. It was: "Clothes, adventure, and a worthy opponent, who could ask for more?" I mean, I'm-I'm on this guy's side. Absolutely.

Morgan

And the fairytale cottage that they have at the end.. The fact that it was dusty, I was very glad of, because I was like, "Hook's been gone a while, if his house isn't screwed, then... I don't understand the magic system here." So I really appreciated them waking up and immediately sneezing and immediately being like, "Wow, this has been reclaimed by nature." But also they're used to that because they've been sleeping on the floor for the past 15 years, I really appreciated how both of them were different in the real world. Hook is not the same person

in Neverland as he is in the real world. And sort of Peter recognising that he isn't the only one who's been putting on this grand persona. Also, the fact that Peter has manners in the real world was quite funny, like the pleases and thank yous just suddenly popping out as soon as he's in the real world.

Sorren

I like that a lot. And I always love when fiction explores that like idealised self versus actual self and the rift between that but also the similarities between that and that was- that was done very well, even though it was like a brief period of time to do it in because it was only the last chapter, I think?

Morgan

Yeah, I would read a whole sequel about them, trying to acclimatise to real life. Living there cottagecore dream as an artist and a writer.

Sorren

Peters gonna repeatedly jump off things because he still thinks that he can fly.

Morgan

Yeah, speaking of the flying, the fact that he has fairy dust in his blood, I thought was really cool.

Sorren

That was one thing though, that I got so excited about, and then it didn't happen, which is... when they're talking about fairy dust and fairy dust having healing properties, they talk about how Peter's blood activates the rune things and Hook's doesn't. And then Hook is injured, and then they're outside and then Peter goes, "Oh, no, you need fairy dust to heal." And then he goes and get some fairies. And I was like, "Why doesn't he just use his blood?" I appreciate that maybe that's not how it works. But the drama of that scene would have been great and they'd set it up perfectly and then it just doesn't happen. And I was very upset.

Morgan

You can have a whole like Phoenix Tears thing of like, Peter like crying over the wound and then it healing.

Sorren

Maybe he could even kiss the wound? We can have a little bit of a Steven Universe moment. It's probably be in his spit, which is kind of gross.

Morgan

I mean, same thing happens at the end of Tangled. So...

Sorren

Morgan, who was your favourite character?

Morgan

Um... Peter. I would steal that man's gender in a second.

Sorren

Can I ask did you have gender envy for Peter as a child? Because I did. And I'm wondering if this is like a universal experience?

Morgan

I think so. I think just completely how unhinged he is. Like I'm always a sucker for unhinged characters to begin with. And his complete refusal to believe in things he doesn't want to believe in... Again, it's the lazy god image. It's the spilling curls over the crown. I'm like, "Absolutely. Give me that. Please." What about you?

Sorren

I think it was Peter marginally. I did also really like Hook though. I just, I had a soft spot for him. I liked that he was a bit more chill. I felt like I could maybe relate to him a bit more personality wise, even though I did still enjoy Peter's complete, unhingedness.

Morgan

I do need to give a shout out to Tink because I thought she was so interesting. The fact that she had grey hair and she was old. And she was still like, "I'm gonna support you," and the fact that she would just became friends with Hook whilst Peter was gone and they just commiserated about how annoying he was?

Sorren

I would love more content of the two of them bad-mouthing Peter behind his back. Actually the fairy queen as well can we- can we get a moment to appreciate her? Because she was also extremely cool. She was kind of there to deliver exposition and she had such gravitas that it was okay.

Morgan

Very regal. Very vibey. Very much just like "Oh, you two again, Jesus Christ."

Sorren

"These gays are ruining my entire kingdom with their pining."

Morgan

"Could you not? Could you take it to the real world, please?"

Sorren

Yeah, you know what, if anything, I feel like maybe the Queen should have been more enthusiastic about them leaving. I mean, I know she was already enthusiastic. But I feel like this should have been like her entire plotline of her just being like, "Can you please get out? Because you are going to tear Neverland to shreds." You know, maybe even that could have been a reason for them to have to leave. You know, Neverland is a shelter for people that need it. But if you guys stay, you're gonna tear it to shreds. You need to leave so that other people can come- can use it before you literally tear it to shreds with your gay yearning for each other.

Morgan

Oh, I do have to talk about another scene actually.

Sorren

Oh, absolutely. Go for it.

Morgan

Hook and Ernest in the cave. But mainly because, like, I find it so interesting when a character is like, "You know, you're not real, right?" And then I love how the boys react to that. Just like, "Wow, Hook told us that we're not real. Bit of a bummer. Anyway..." And like Hook's realisation and just that "Oh, you too."

Sorren

I'm amazed that Hook didn't pick up on it earlier because I felt like Ernest coming in and influencing all of the Lost Boys to stop being murderous, mindless creatures and telling them about like, democracy and peace negotiations was kind of, like, a dead giveaway that this was, like, a person with a brain and not just, like, another figment of Peter's imagination. But you know, Hook had been there for a while. I felt like he was also starting to get a bit fuzzy on the whole real/not-real thing. So you can you can forgive him this slip. But it was- it was a good scene.

Morgan

Definitely. Definitely. Sorren. What did you think of this book that I introduced you to? There are right answers only.

Sorren

I really enjoyed this book. I loved... I just had so much fun with it. I will say that I read this so quickly. I wasn't feeling that well and I knew that I was kind of a bit behind in the days I had left to read it. So I lay down and I was like, "I'm going to read one chapter of it just to get ahead of myself." And then I read the entire thing. I was definitely entranced. You know, if you want an adventure that you will enjoy every word of I think this is definitely a book that you should read. I think rating wise I- you might be offended, I would probably

also give this four stars. And the pure reason is just... I didn't feel like they had enough incentive to leave at the end. Like I just feel like... the meta narrative could have been neater, like character development wise and character relationship wise, it was fantastic. It was perfect. But in terms of them coming to terms with their own situations and their own will to live, I suppose. I felt like it needed a little bit more thought.

Morgan

Yeah, I mean, coming from you a four is very good. So I'll take it. I'll take it. I unsurprisingly, rated this a five out of five. The first time I read it. And the second time I read it. I just- I just had a lot of fun. Yeah, I just really enjoyed it. And I think it was just so unapologetic and so vibey. And I haven't read that many books with trans men characters, which actually, sort of ,talk about it. And I just... it was just so fun. And it was so vibey and we love a good enemies to lovers arc. So five out of five fromme.

Sorren

For people who have enjoyed this book, what would you recommend?

Morgan

I am going to recommend Every Heart a Doorway by Seanan McGuire. It's the first in a series of books, but you don't have to read them in any particular order, which is about portal fantasy and sort of what happens afterwards. And I just think the sort of fairy-tale but for grown-ups vibe is the same. They're roughly the same length. I think every Heart a Doorway is a bit shorter. It's also got a trans male character in it, who has sort of similar vibes to Peter, I think. Just gives off the same energy. Like same book different font. And also got a lot of violence that you're not expecting that just comes out of nowhere and you're like, "Oh, dear, people are dying. Why are they dying?" What about you?

Sorren

If you enjoyed Peter Darling, you might also enjoy The Kingdoms by Natasha Pulley. It's got a very different feel. But if you enjoyed the sort of charged romance in Peter Darling, the enemies to lovers trope, the "Is this person going to kill me, or are they going to make out with me?" situation and also the touch of historical setting and how queer characters function in a historical setting. I will say that it has not got any trans characters at the forefront. It has one who's in the background who isn't handled fantastically. She's not mishandled, but she's just very much a side character.

Morgan

So next time we're going to be talking about Sistersong by Lucy Holland. I'm very excited to make you read this.

Sorren

I'm very excited to read this.

Morgan

It was one of my favourite books last year. Until then you're always welcome through the bookcase.

Sorren

Don't forget to give the cat a scratch on your way out.

Thank you for listening to The Hidden Bookcase a production of Planar Prod On this episode you have Morgan Greensmith and Sorren Briarwood discussing Peter Darling by Austin Chant. You can find out more about this book at austinchant.com and you can follow Chant @essaychant on Twitter.

July is historical fiction month at The Hidden Bookcase.

On our next episode, which will be out on Monday the fourth of July we'll be discussing sister song by Lucy Holland. We hope to see them and in the meantime, you're always welcome through the bookcase.