



Book Club Set

The House in The Cerulean Sea

By TJ Klune

About the Author



TJ KLUNE is the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling, Lambda Literary Award-winning author of *The House in the Cerulean Sea*, *The Extraordinaries*, and more. Being queer himself, Klune believes it's important—now more than ever—to have accurate, positive queer representation in stories.

Retrieved from: <https://www.tjklunebooks.com/about>

About the Book

Lambda Literary Award-winning author TJ Klune's bestselling, breakout contemporary fantasy that's "1984 meets The Umbrella Academy with a pinch of Douglas Adams thrown in."

Linus Baker is a by-the-book caseworker in the department in charge of Magical Youth. He is tasked with determining whether six dangerous magical children are likely to bring about the end of the world.

Arthur Parnassus is the master of the orphanage. He would do anything to keep the children safe, even if that means the world would burn. And his secrets will come to light.

The house in the Cerulean Sea is an enchanting love story, masterfully told, about the profound experience of discovering an unlikely family in an unexpected place - and realizing that family is yours.

Discussion Questions



1. This book runs on an emotional engine, capitalizing on the six major emotions of fear, anger, disgust, surprise, happiness and sadness. Were you feeling the feelings while reading the book? Which scenes or characters elicited the most emotional response from you?
2. The book's prose is descriptive, in a very wry way. For instance, in the first chapter, Klune introduces us to Ms. Jenkins of the Department in Charge of Magical Youth (DICOMY).

First he describes her office decor- "The walls were lined with terrible paintings of lemurs in various poses". And then he describes her person- "as was her want, she appeared to have applied her makeup rather liberally in the dark without benefit of a mirror".

How did you find the setting and character descriptions? Did you have a favorite line?

3. Linus goes on both a physical and an emotional journey when he visits the school. He was always diligent in his work, but he was also very emotionally stoppered up. What was it about the school, the kids and Arthur that cracked Linus open?
4. DICOMY exercises some serious institutional overreach. The creepy slogans give you insight into their real purpose:

"We are happiest when we listen to those in charge", "A quiet child is a healthy mind", "Who needs magic when you have your imagination" and "See something, say something. Registration helps everyone".

Talk about some other books and movies that feature dictatorial overreach or magical suppression. (Hint: 1984, the movie Brazil, Dickens, Children of Men, City of Brass series, The Bartimaeus Trilogy, Spellbreaker, The Magician's Guild, Children of Blood and Bone.)

5. There are some ways in which Marsyas is a completely normal boarding school, such as having dinner together and talking about what you learned that day. And then there are things going on that definitely aren't on your local school board's approved curriculum. Discuss what you found perfectly to be normal about the

school, and then share a few ways in which the school was charting its own course.

6. What were you expecting of Arthur? Did you believe that he was simply a headmaster, or did you suspect that he had powers? What did you think about his big reveal?
7. "Change often starts with the smallest of whispers. Like-minded people building it up to a roar." Linus clearly changes in the book and it seems that the villagers are coming along as well. Could the events of this book start a ripple of change in DICOMY and Extremely Upper Management?
8. Which of the students did you relate to the most? Or rather, which of them would you like to be for a day?

Author Interview



This book defies classification! Published as an adult title, winning an Alex Award for YA crossover appeal, it could also easily fit on middle grades shelves next to Harry Potter or the Penderwicks or the Melendy quartet from Elizabeth Enright. Why do you think this book works across so many ages?

I think there's something not only topical about the story, but also universal in its messaging. Fantasy is often filled with grimdark stories (absolutely nothing wrong with that!), and we don't get to see a lot of "happy" fantasy these days. I wanted to write a story that reminded me of the cozy fantasies I read as a kid, books that not only made me happy, but allowed me to believe everything could be okay. Hope can often seem like it's in short supply these days, and while a novel like *The House in the Cerulean Sea* won't fix the world's problems, I hope it can at least serve as a small reminder that we are capable of so much when we stand for what we believe in and lift each other up. I choose to believe that a good number of people want to feel hope, especially over the last year we've all been through. And the idea of accepting differences and creating change through goodwill is something that people can believe in, no matter what age they are.

Many have pointed out how today's teens have a higher propensity for outrage against prejudice, injustice, and intolerance. With that, though, often comes an outright dismissal of those who hold views they disagree with. Early on, Linus says, "*Hate is a waste of time. I'm far too busy to hate anything.*" Do you think that anger, that feeling that might get close to hate, has a place, or do you agree with Linus?

I think there is a definite and necessary place for anger, so long as it doesn't become all a person knows because that might turn into something darker. Hatred has a way of changing a person: twisting them until they're unrecognizable. I would know. I've been there before.

But to me, there's a difference between being angry and hating something. Anger at indifference, at marginalization, at bigotry, is important. We get angry because we care, and don't understand how others could be so willfully ignorant—or worse, knowingly hateful.

There's a reason for that "today's teens have a higher propensity for outrage against prejudice, injustice, and intolerance." They are so much more self-aware than the generations that came before them (including my own), and they're at the forefront of standing up for what's right. Part of me wishes they didn't have to do that—that kids

could just be kids—but many of them have been victims of discrimination in one form or another. Many of them know how wrong that is and that the power to shape the future rests with them. I can't wait to see what they come up with.

One of my favorite of Arthur's wise words is this: "The world is a weird and wonderful place. Why must we try and explain it all away?" For our personal satisfaction? If you agree with Arthur, what advice would you offer to young readers on how to embrace the weirdness and wonder in the world?

That's what life is! Life is so weird and wonderful that it boggles the mind. Can it hurt too? Yes, of course it can, and badly. But that's not all it is.

When I was a kid—queer, effeminate, a mouth and brain that never stopped moving—I wanted to be anyone else but who I was. I felt like I had an "otherness" about me, something that made me different from my peers, unable to relate to them. I felt like an outsider, even in my own skin.

But as I got older, I learned—through working on myself and plenty of therapy—that our differences need to be celebrated rather than denigrated. I'm a weird guy, and there's nothing wrong with that because there's no one like me. Embrace your weirdness. Embrace your otherness because it's yours and yours alone. That can be easier said than done, I know, but when you find people who love you for you and not for who you think they want you to be, there's nothing like it. It feels like finding home.

More than once in the book, readers can run across the idea that people often fear what they don't understand. What can we do to foster understanding? Do books play a role?

I think books play a big part. While stories can be just that—stories—every author is different, and marginalized authors especially can open doors that readers might not have considered walking through before on their own. Books can open up entire worlds and different perspectives.

But as much as I wish it so, a book can't do the work for a person. I can shout until I'm blue in the face about making the world a better place through knowledge, understanding, and empathy, but I can't force anyone to pay that forward or adopt it in their own lives. Like it's said in the book, so many of us go through our lives with blinders on, and the idea of attempting to dismantle our biases can be a scary thing, especially if we refuse to see that we have biases to begin with. If we hope to foster understanding, we first need to work on ourselves, to question our own biases, and why

we have them to begin with. I do that constantly, and while I'm trying to be more self-aware, I'm still a work in progress. I think I might always be, but I'll keep at it because I want to learn how to be a better person. And as hard as it might be to hear (especially for someone like me who has ADHD and loves talking), sometimes, we need to close our mouths and listen. Listen to those around us, those whose voices are often drowned out by bluster and noise.

Just about every interview I've conducted this year has come around to the central idea of hope. I know this is because we all need it, especially when times are difficult. But your book reminds us, too, of our responsibility to give young children that hope:

"Hope," Mr. Parnassus repeated. "Because that is what we must give him, what we must give all of them. Hope and guidance and a place to call their own, a home where they can be who they are without fear of repercussion."

Living, as I do, in a state that seeks to deny trans children access to sports or medical care, I can't help but feel the ways we deny so many children this kind of hope. It's true, too, for children in all sorts of families, where they don't feel safe to be who they are even at home. Is there anything we can do to help these children find that hope?

I wish I could solve this. I wish I could find a way to keep every kid safe, to let them have room to make mistakes and learn from them, to carve a space out for themselves to figure out who and what they want to be without fear of reprisal.

When I was a kid, I tried to hide big parts of myself, specifically my queerness. I grew up in a poor, rural farming community in Oregon, and being a loud queer kid with ADHD didn't exactly see me welcomed with open arms. I'm here, which means I survived, but survival should be the absolute bare minimum. Fostering spaces for kids to be themselves should be just as important as protecting them. There's that program geared toward queer youth of It Gets Better, but that implies that the "better" happens in the nebulous future. What about right now? What if it's not good right now, at this moment? How can we help? How can we change that? How can we find a way to ensure children don't lose hope?

I don't know. I don't know, and that sucks. The best I can do is use my voice to try and help people see issues such as this from a different side. Will that always work? No, and maybe not even much of the time. But that won't stop me from trying again and

again, in hopes that at least one person might think about how they act toward others, and if something needs to change.

The other side of the hope lesson comes from Talia, when she faces the ugly reality of someone's fear of her with such grace, explaining to Linus, "there's so much hope even when it doesn't seem like it" and going on to clarify that just the existence of that awful woman's little girl grants the possibility of a better future. She might grow up to hate those who are different from her, but she might not! Books like this are a powerful tool in the fight against those prejudicial hatreds, but we can all think of libraries or parents who would not welcome this book. If we know representation does such powerful work, how can we continue to break down the barriers to that representation?

I've heard from so many people who've read *Cerulean* since it came out. Most of them were telling me how much they enjoyed the story, that they were sharing it with their friends and families. One woman wrote that she "didn't mind the homosexuals" but that having the Antichrist as a character might have been a "step too far."

And you know what? I'll take it. Some might see the phrase "didn't mind the homosexuals" and flinch at that, or get angry at how dismissive it sounds, or condescendingly magnanimous. I can't know her beliefs, or if there was something hidden in that phrase specifically, but I choose to believe that her views were broadened, at least a little. Is that naïve? Perhaps. But what if it's not? What if this woman had never read a queer story before, and maybe she wasn't outright homophobic, but more so uneducated about how queer people exist? Is it my job to teach her? Some would say no, but if I can help anyone overcome their prejudices through my work, then I'm all for it, even when I'm being damned with faint praise. We can't hope to change minds if we don't put in the work. And yes, it shouldn't be up to marginalized communities to educate others—that work should come from the person themselves—but if I can point someone in the right direction, then I'm going to do it and hope for the best. Will it always work? Hell no. But not for lack of trying.

At one point, Linus says, "*Hate is loud, but I think you'll learn it's because it's only a few people shouting, desperate to be heard.*" I want this to be true, but is it? Doesn't it feel like the hateful voices are getting louder?

They are getting louder. But it's not just in the last year, or even the last five. It's firmly rooted in the fabric of this country: racism, misogyny, bigotry of all kinds. It has been with us since the beginning, and it'll probably be with us for a long time to come. Here's the thing: they are a minority. Yes, they're loud. Yes, some people listen to them. And yes, we see the consequences of their actions and the hurt they cause almost

daily. But there are so many more of us than there are of them. Unfortunately, our voices aren't amplified on the news the same way hate-speech is. Bad news sells: people with their tiki-torches and furious sneers, spouting hate. It's stunning to watch, and watch what we do. We don't look away. But I choose to believe there's a reason for that. While some might just watch for the spectacle without understanding the context, others are trying to find ways to counteract, to stop it, to fix a system so broken, it's frankly stunning.

As I mentioned previously, kids these days are so much more self-aware than I ever was. Part of it has to do with having an entire universe of information at their fingertips whenever they want it, but a bigger part—at least to me—is they know right from wrong. They see the hateful people marching in the streets and know that's not who they want to be. That's not the world they want to live in. Do I worry about the future? Sure. I'm human, after all. But the kids are all right, and I pity anyone who tries to stand in their way.

For real: you want to see politicians and/or bigots put in their place online? Have them do something messed up and watch as thousands of young people spam their mentions with everything from devastating snark, rebuttals with receipts and evidence, or fan-cams. Watch as the queer kids take over hateful hashtags on Twitter with pictures of themselves living their best lives. If they can do that much with just a few buttons on their phones, imagine who these kids will grow up to be. I worry about the future. I don't worry about the generations that are following mine.

You've got a busy release schedule coming up and a fascinating work in progress. What can we look forward to from you in the near future?

I'm so excited about my 2021 schedule! From Tor Teen in July, the second novel in the Extraordinaries trilogy, called *Flash Fire*. It follows a sixteen year old named Nick who is neurodiverse and trying to figure out how to survive his junior year while also obsessing over the superheroes in his city that he writes fanfiction of. Book II picks up where the first book left off, and I can't wait for readers to see what comes next. This will be followed next year by the last book in the trilogy, which I've almost finished writing. In September, Tor will release *Under the Whispering Door*, my comedy about grief. It follows a not-so-nice man named Wallace who dies and is taken as a ghost to a tea shop in a quiet village. At this teashop is the owner, Hugo, who also acts as a ferryman, a person who helps souls cross over to what comes next. But Wallace isn't ready to leave just yet as he didn't exactly live a good life, and finds himself falling for Hugo and the funny little family he's created. This book is my exploration of the celebration of life and the power of grief: what it can do to a person, both good and bad. There will be

laughter, there will be tears, and so, so many cups of tea while ruminating over what comes next. I don't have all the answers as to what that might be, so this book is my wish to the universe for what could await us all when we close our eyes for the last time.

And I'm just getting started. I plan on writing until my fingers fall off. When and if they do, I'll know that I did my damndest to tell stories about queer people that treats them with the love and respect they deserve.

Retrieved from: <https://www.yalsa.ala.org/thehub/2021/05/07/an-interview-with-alex-award-winner-tj-klune-author-of-the-house-in-the-cerulean-sea/>

Other Links and Resources



Controversy reviews:

- <https://charmedlibrarian.com/2022/01/18/the-house-in-the-cerulean-sea/#:~:text=House%20in%20the%20Cerulean%20Sea%20was%20a%20story%20born%20from,still%20having%20an%20effect%20today.>
- <https://thatlizhunter.medium.com/is-kindness-enough-9702286869a6>

Share your thoughts with other readers!



DATE: _____

BOOK CLUB: _____

BOOK TITLE: _____

As a group we rated this book:

1	2	3	4	5
Ugh!		It was OK...		Loved it!

Would we recommend this book to other book clubs?

Yes No Undecided

Why/why not?

Our discussion: