



## YA Café Podcast

### Episode 9: *Picture Us in the Light*

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- Danielle: Welcome to the YA Café where we share conversations about books for teachers, readers, and caffeine addicts. Everywhere. On today's episode, we'll be talking about "Picture Us In The Light" by Kelly Loy Gilbert. Grab a mug of your favorite beverage friends, and let's talk books.
- Amanda: Welcome y'all. As always, our first segment will be spoiler free, and so you can stick around even if you haven't checked out this novel yet. I'm Amanda Thrasher
- Danielle: and I'm Danielle Hall, an 8th & 9th Grade English teacher and I blog at TeachNouvelle.com, and we're excited to talk about this new book today. In "Picture Us In the Light" 17 year old Danny receives news that he's been accepted into Rhode Island School of Design. To anyone looking on this seems like great news, except that Danny has a huge secret, he hasn't been able to draw in a year. But even as Danny's struggling to overcome his own artist's block, some of his parents' secrets come to light and threaten to topple everything they've worked for. Danny must find a way to face the past in order to make room for the future.
- Amanda: So Danielle, what did you think of this book?
- Danielle: I really liked this book. I thought it was sweet. I liked the characters. I liked all of the descriptions of trying to be able to draw and not getting anything to come onto the page. It was very heartfelt and very warm and I liked it a lot. What did you think, Amanda?
- Amanda: I liked it, but I would describe it very differently than you just described it. I would not classify this book is very warm. I felt like a lot of times you felt Danny's isolation, even though he has this connection to his friends, there's a lot of baggage and history that I think gets in the way. So I think it's clear that there's a lot of people who care a lot about each other, but I would not classify this as like a warm book, but I, I liked it a lot. I thought it was really well done.
- So one thing it's important to mention as we go into the discussion of this book is it centers very much around Danny coming to grips with his Asian-American identity. Uh, so his parents were both born in China and he was born in Texas and there's a lot of his race and heritage that informs the novel. Danielle and I are both white, so we had a lot of conversations about whether or not we should do this book because we don't have that voice, but we also haven't found a lot of like professional reviews or anything about this book yet and hopefully it gets a lot more traffic and attention and we wanted to make sure that we weren't excluding this book, which was excellent, just because we did not share this identity. So going into it, you should know that we're both white. We're trying real hard. If we say something that doesn't work or doesn't fit for you, if you like, identify in this way, feel free to reach out and let us know and we will do everything we can to be better.
- Danielle: Absolutely. And we really hope for more representation in books and movies and television and media. And so one of the goals of our podcast is to amplify stories with characters of color and that are created by creators of color, even though we are two white women, you know, kind of looking in on that media. So all of that being said, definitely call us out if we get it wrong, please, you can contact us at [yacafepodcast@gmail.com](mailto:yacafepodcast@gmail.com). All right, so in *Picture Us in the Light*, Danny goes to this high pressure private school in Cupertino-

- Amanda: where you always know the weather because it's on your iPhone -
- Danielle: and it's the default iPhone weather. And he's got these two friends, Harry and Regina. Regina is kind of this high flying, super ambitious editor of the school newspaper, really like in your face, awesome character. And Harry is the guy that everyone likes at school. He's like super high achieving and you know, the class president for 11 years in a row or whatever. So both of these people comprise Danny's entire social group. Like Amanda said, he is isolated in a lot of ways. And we'll get back later to why I thought it was heartfelt. But definitely when you're at school, you do see how few friends Danny has and how he's really not interested in having more. One of the things that I really liked about the presence of Harry in this novel was that he represents a very different side of the Asian American experience from Danny. Um, and this is straight out of the book. Once again, I'm a white woman reading this book, but one of the things that Danny says is
- Danielle: "Harry always says, my parents are Asian light. How they've never taken me to China, how they barely taught me Chinese, how they're soft. It bugs me every time. Partly I'm sure he really does think my parents are Americanized. And in some ways they are. But partly I think it's just that they're from a random town in mainland China. Harry's a snob."
- Danielle: And so already Danny is giving us this window into a multi-faceted Chinese-American experience, Taiwanese-American experience. And so even though there's a point in the novel where Danny comments on how many Changs there are in his senior class, it's clear that this is a multi-faceted perspective on the Asian American experience. And I also really like, that this is such a small detail of the book, but I really like the Harry and Regina talk about their summer trips to Taiwan and like how they were supposed to meet up but didn't. And it's, it's just a really funny like aspect of summer life that I haven't - had not given much thought to before.
- Amanda: One of the things I really liked, particularly with the character of Harry, is how Danny could interpret all of Harry's actions based on whether or not he was giving him the benefit of the doubt. So in the beginning, Danny thinks that Harry is just like this super smarmy and manipulative guy who just knows how to play all the people around him and doesn't actually care that much about them. And then when Danny gets to know Harry, he realizes no, he's a genuine person who is interested in these other people and just tends to know the exact right thing to say. So I liked that evolution of how a person can change based on how much benefit of the doubt you're willing to give them.
- Danielle: Absolutely. And I think that Regina kind of operates the same way in like that Danny's perspective on Regina changes as well. So in this book, Danny really feels the burden of his parent's happiness. Both of his parents are Chinese immigrants and he knows fairly early on in his life, I believe he said he was five or six years old that he has or had a sister, so he has a dead sister and you know, he never met her and he doesn't know the extent of his parents grief because it's something that they don't talk about, but occasionally it does flare up and you know, his mother will say, "Oh, well your dad is sad today", or you know, his dad will say that his mother was taken to the hospital for grief and anxiety and a panic attack. And so this becomes in Danny's life, just this emotional burden of their grief and he feels that he is the child that lived and he's not living up to everything that they wanted from a child. So he feels a lot of pressure from that.
- Amanda: Yeah, I liked that. That was always a part of him. Like even at the very beginning, he gets this dorky sweatshirt from the Rhode Island School of Design that his mom got him and he wears it out in public with his friends even though you know he knows that it's super dorky to wear this like fresh sweat shirt. Um, just because it made his parents happy and I thought they had a really interesting and good parent child relationship because it was really complicated because there were all these layers

of Danny knowing that they had another daughter who died... And of all of this weight of expectations and then fairly early in the novel, Danny's father loses his job and that that extra level of complication that his parents have, not only with Danny but with each other made it really believable that this was just this really difficult time in Danny's life and I thought that it was really good and I liked a lot that his father's depression and his mother's panic attacks - they weren't just like these token quirks. They were this real part of their lives that impacted them. Like when his father won't come out for Christmas or his mom really needs to like sit down for a minute and how it was just a part of the fabric of his life. I thought it was good.

Danielle: I agree. I really liked that too. I liked these three characters were all really three dimensional and it wasn't just this, effacing of parents that we sometimes have in a YA novel. So there was definitely a lot of depth there and I really liked how their anxiety and their grief informed Danny's self perception and kind of created this environment in which his Imposter Syndrome could really flourish. So Danny, as I said in the summary, can't draw and he hasn't been able to draw for a year. And so he feels like he's a total fraud for getting into RISD and that's the Rhode Island School of Design. So he got into RISD and he's super excited but he hasn't been able to draw. So does he deserve to go to RISD? Is he going to really be a good artist if he can't draw anymore? And some day someone is going to find him out. And one of the ways this manifests itself in the novel is that Danny has this character in his head. It's based on a neighbor with whom he had a really negative interaction because the neighbor said something racist when Danny was drawing on the sidewalk with sidewalk chalk. But now that neighbor's voice is like the voice of all of Danny's doubts and fears. And he calls this guy Mr. X and Danny says, "... anyway, lately I'm a reverse Midas. Everything I touched turning to crap and so good old Mr. X has been louder lately. 'You're a fraud. You've peaked. It's all downhill from here. The world doesn't need your art. Get a real job.' But now I have concrete proof that I'm not a fraud, or at the very least, I'm a very convincing one, which should change everything, right? The fog should lift, but it doesn't." And Danny really still struggles with his feelings of inadequacy.

Amanda: Yeah. I thought that the, the recurring image of Mr. X was a good one to particularly later when he, uh, he confronts it again towards the end of the novel.

Danielle: And with that friends, we'll take our first break. And when we come back, we'll share about Things We Like A Latte, then we'll return to our discussion of "Picture Us In the Light" and dig a little deeper.

Amanda: Welcome back y'all. It's time for our Things We Like A Latte. So Danielle, what is your brew choice this week?

Danielle: This week I'm really digging the Netflix show "Nailed It". It is based on the Pinterest meme phenomenon where people would find something on Pinterest and then they would attempt to make it, and it never turns out like the Pinterest thing. So you know, the, the Pinterest fails. So this show is totally based on that and it's a baking show. And so amateur bakers come in and they have a model cake that they need to make, and they fail spectacularly and it's so awesome. And one of the things that really makes this show great to watch is that it's all in good fun. The contestants know that they're going to fail miserably. The judges are very lighthearted about it and a lot of fun. We're not like making fun of these people; we're just all having fun together and it's just a lighthearted, fun show that will really make you want to eat cake.

Amanda: How about you Amanda? What is the thing you Like A Latte. My thing I Like A Latte is a review that came out in the Huffington Post on the 27th of March. It is called " Sean Penn the Novelist Must be Stopped" and it is by Claire Fallon and it is an outstandingly savage takedown of this terrible book written by this, uh, by all accounts, terrible person. And she just eviscerates it and it's wonderful to

read. I'm not a person who likes to read bad reviews all that often, but uh, this is the one, if you like to read a few bad reviews, this is the one. Here is a good example of her, her feelings on this book "As a long time passionate defender of polysyllabic words and dense prose in the name of precision and complexity, I consider myself taught a very painful lesson by Bob Honey. Sometimes longer words are not more precise, just because Penn chose to use the word "soupcon" doesn't mean he's used it precisely. In fact, he rarely uses words quite correctly." And the whole article is like that. I recommend it if you just want to hate on somebody just to make your afternoon a little brighter. "Sean Penn the Novelist Must be Stopped"

Danielle: We're going to take a quick break and when we come back, we'll return to our discussion on "Picture Us In the Light". The rest of the show may contain spoilers, so if you're leaving here, keeping touch on Instagram and Twitter @yacafepodcast, and if you're a teacher or a librarian and you want to know more about this book for an education setting, checkout ideas at TeachNouvelle.com/yacafepodcast. We'll be back after this quick break.

Amanda: Welcome back, y'all to the YA Cafe. We're continuing our discussion on "Picture Us In the Light" by Kelly Loy Gilbert. If you haven't read this yet, we want to warn you again that this segment will contain spoilers.

Danielle: Spoilers!

Amanda: So one of the things that we find out pretty early in the second half of the story, explicitly, is that Danny's friend Sandra has committed suicide. We originally talked about putting this in the non spoiler section, but I didn't get this at all. My version of the story was formatted much worse than Danielle's version of the story, and so I thought that it was a pretty strong spoiler that I didn't get because I didn't even really realize that Sandra was gone. What did you think about it, Danielle?

Danielle: So I felt that this was a really important part of the teenage experience to include in the novel. Sandra was Regina's best friend, so Sandra's absence kind of leads to a lot of Regina's isolation and also her struggles. And so I thought that that really kind of like, made us more sympathetic to Regina. Danny blames himself for Sandra's suicide, and when he recounts how the suicide affected their school, you can see a lot of how all tragedies effect schools. The school brings in grief counselors and urges students to reach out, but students feel pretty isolated from teachers, and it just is definitely something that has a huge impact on the community. This is compounded by the fact that schools do not want to glorify suicide, and so they often prevent students from mourning their classmates in the same way that you would mourn people who were in a car accident. They can't decorate the locker, they can't create any sort of memorial. And this becomes an issue in this novel because Regina does want there to be a memorial for the year anniversary marking Sandra's suicide. What did you think about Sandra's inclusion in this novel?

Amanda: I thought that it showed that people still really don't know how to deal with suicide. Like the principal was very worried about glorifying it, particularly because he perceives Cupertino as this very high stress pressure-cooker kind of school. And I think just the principal being so worried that somebody else would go and emulate Sandra if it looked like she was doing something great. So they opted to sort of pretend it didn't happen almost. And I don't know, I thought that it was a very realistic portrayal of a school's response, but also a disappointing one because we still clearly don't know how to deal with it.

Danielle: I agree. And lastly, in terms of the impact on Danny, one of the things that Harry says to Danny after Sandra commits suicide is Harry makes Danny promise that he's never going to do that. So I mean,

you know, at the end of the day a promise is meaningless and there still needs to be friendship and communication and lack of isolation and then like a lot of other things because it's complex issue, but it does show that Harry is concerned about Danny's mental health.

- Amanda: I don't know if it showed that he was concerned about his mental health so much as just viewing Danny as being essential to him and just that sort of reaching out to someone and demanding they hang on kind of thing.
- Danielle: I get what you're saying, like Harry didn't want to lose another friend.
- Amanda: Yeah
- Danielle: It makes sense. So I do want to jump in here and say that Danny tells us very early on as readers that he likes Harry. So you know, Danny is a queer voice in this novel,
- Amanda: so he "like likes" Harry.
- Danielle: Yes, he "like likes" Harry. He is a queer voice in this novel, but this book is not a coming out story and it's not even really a story centered on like a queer experience so much as it is a story with a queer character.
- Amanda: Yeah. It really feels like the seventh most important thing happening to Danny in this novel.
- Danielle: Absolutely. And we want more of that, right? We want more characters who represent a wide range of experiences but have more than one story to tell.
- Amanda: Yeah. And anybody who reads this book and is like, "I don't know why they made Danny gay, like it's just one more thing and I don't think they needed it". Like look at yourself, and I want you to instead of this in every book that you read, say "I don't know why they decided to make Katniss straight. It was just one more thing for her to worry about". Just accept it and just like it.
- Danielle: Yeah. And I think it's also really worthwhile to mention when characters are queer and it's not a thing that the audience can just know for themselves. Like
- Amanda: looking at you, Harry Potter,
- Danielle: We are. JK Rowling, you should've just said Dumbledore was gay.
- Amanda: She's a big podcast fan by the way.
- Danielle: So, it does come out in the second half of the novel that Danny's parents are undocumented and this really contributes to a lot of their stress when Danny's father loses his job. And you know, the way that Danny figures this out is that his father is now looking for jobs as an Uber driver or like a janitor or things that might not be so highly vetted and I thought it was really interesting to see the web of things that immigration impacts in terms of how easy life is.
- Amanda: I thought that the whole undocumented storyline was handled really well by the author. I was deeply frustrated by the parents. I know that they had this like deep fear, but I definitely felt that they weren't very fair to Danny when they were like, you don't know the risk that you put us in when you just didn't do what we said. Like, well of course he didn't know; he had no way to know.

Danielle: One of Amanda's pet peeves as a reader and as a viewer of movies and tv is when characters create problems for themselves simply by not communicating

Amanda: I have a lot of pet peeves apparently. But I just feel like you can make good stories and have people not deliberately hide information. Yeah. All of my pet peeves go back to deliberately hiding information in one way or another.

Danielle: And so his parents are not letting him into this and it's, you know, air quotes to protect him. But in a lot of ways he's able to endanger them through his ignorance so they could have just communicated.

Amanda: Yeah, definitely. But I think that the fear of what happens if you're found out by immigration is incredibly real and I can understand more in this situation than others that his parents were not being honest with him just because the threat is so high. The possibilities are so dangerous. There is a point where Regina talks about the detention centers and how if they get picked up by immigration, the two of them will probably be separated. They will have to wait for months just to get a hearing.

Danielle: Or years.

Amanda: Or years. This is something that is a huge problem in the US and what should be these illegal detention centers with inhumane conditions where people are just forced to wait to find out their status and it's a problem. And I was really glad to see that this novel not only had undocumented characters, but was very real about the threats that they faced.

Danielle: I agree. And this is something that you can definitely research more about. This is a real thing that people are afraid of, you know, justly so. And it impacts a lot of their actions every day. You know, in this novel, Danny's mom always wants him to drive, she doesn't want to drive, so he's had this responsibility for a long time. She feels like she can't be her authentic self with her friends because she doesn't want them to know about their status. So these are really things that are preventing a full happiness for his parents and contributing to their stress and anxiety.

Amanda: Yes, and a big part of why the immigration question even came up at all centered around this storyline in which their first daughter was not actually dead, but she was kidnapped and sold to this international adoption agency and adopted by a white family without knowing that her parents were alive when she was first adopted by them.

Danielle: So we do get eventually this plot of Danny wanting to find his sister. Once he finds out that she was kidnapped and he realizes that she's in the United States, he wants to find her and you know, he hopes that this is the thing that's going to make it okay with his parents and relieve some of their stress. For me, this is where the novel went somewhere that I was not ready to follow it. I felt that this was an extraneous plot line.

Amanda: Oh, I didn't. I was super on-board with it. So I thought that it was really essential because Danny has been informed his entire life by this concept of being the second choice. He has spent his whole life thinking that his sister died and it's a recurring theme throughout the novel that do my parents wish that I was the one that died. His sister was the one that lived, so that is something that comes up over and over for him. So I think that it was very important for Danny to go meet his sister and see that she, given the choice, did not choose to connect with her biological parents. So I thought that this was really important for Danny to really feel like he belonged with his parents in this very fundamental way. I thought it worked very well with the novel.

Danielle: Ok. I can definitely see that. I really liked Joy. I liked that she had her, her life and her things that were going on. And you know, even though she was an adult, she still wasn't ready to connect with her biological parents. She felt abandoned and angry and I thought that that provided a lot of depth on like, you know, in Danny's perspective, like he was going to be a hero and save the day and reunite everybody. And that wasn't gonna happen.

Amanda: I think that the character Joy also really opened up this whole other possibility for the Asian American experience like we talked about with Harry having his own version and there's just so much here. Like, this could be a whole 'nother book about Joy, which I would love to read. There is a series of essays on the now-defunct web site called The Toast about international adoption and I think most of their writers are from Korean adoption, but I'm not positive but very similar as far as like the complications of being raised by white parents even though they appear Korean or Chinese or whatever to the world and just how that really shapes their identities. I thought it was a really great series of essays and something worth looking into for sure if you were interested in this part of the book and we'll put some of the links in our show notes.

Danielle: And just the last thing, I guess I could've put this in the non spoilery section because it's not really a spoiler, but I really loved Kelly Loy Gilbert's writing. Her writing was so beautiful and so poetic and that's something that I definitely dig and here's another quote as an example. "This is something I know now that I didn't then: that almost all of us have wanted to leave it before. Maybe you always do when your days feel like one endless night closing in on you and you lose the light, grope around in darkness before it starts to feel easier to just let it swallow you altogether. But I also know that you can try to rope off that idea that somehow you'd be better off gone, and instead set your compass to some shore beyond it. I know it can be done. I loved her writing, I felt that it was completely immersive and I loved this book and I strongly recommend it.

And that's our show today, friends. You can find us on instagram and Twitter @yacafepodcast, and we would love to hear from you. And if you're enjoying the show, please consider leaving us a review on iTunes. Happy reading!