



YA Café Podcast

Episode 18: *The Art of Escaping*

21 June 2018

- Danielle: [00:03](#) 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 *The Art of Escaping* by Erin Callahan. Grab a mug of your favorite beverage friends and let's talk books.
- Ad: [00:17](#) This podcast is made possible by Nouvelle ELA Teaching Resources. Find Secondary ELA resources to engage and inspire like Collaborative Bell Ringers. NOUVELLE ELA, something new.
- Amanda: [00:31](#) Welcome y'all. As always, our first segment will be spoiler free so you can stick around even if you haven't checked out the new novel yet. I'm Amanda Thrasher
- Danielle: [00:37](#) and I'm Danielle Hall an 8th and 9th Grade English teacher and I blog at teachnouvelle.com. And we are joined today by our guest Jennifer Ruppe. Hi, Jenn.
- Jenn: [00:37](#) Hi, ladies!
- Danielle: [00:51](#) Jenn's the Executive Director of the Guilford Green Foundation in Greensboro, North Carolina. The Guilford Green Foundation works to support the needs of the LGBTQ+ community in Greensboro and Guilford County in general. Can you share some of the work you're doing there?
- Jenn: [01:02](#) First of all, thank you guys for having me. Yeah, so I'm the Executive Director at Guilford Green Foundation and we provide philanthropy and programming for the LGBTQ community here in Greensboro, North Carolina and Guilford County and our surrounding area. So we provide grant funding for programs that provide services and resources for the LGBTQ community as well as operate our local LGBTQ community center, which is a safe and affirming space for all LGBTQ people to just have a safe place to be, connect with community and participate in other programs that we offer.
- Danielle: [01:40](#) And you have some special stuff going for teens, right?
- Jenn: [01:43](#) Yes, we do provide programming specifically for youth 19 and under. We have a youth night on Wednesday nights. We just try to provide opportunities for youth to connect with each other in a safe and

affirming space and also a place for parents and kids to find resources to help them their journey wherever they are coming out or you know, just living their true lives as an LGBTQ person.

- Danielle: [02:12](#) That sounds great. And before we started recording, you mentioned that you were working on developing a library.
- Jenn: [02:18](#) Yes. That's one of the exciting projects that we're launching in July. Of this year actually with a grant from a local foundation called the community foundation of Greater Greensboro, we received a grant to start a LGBTQ library. I think it's particularly important to preserve literature that is for about and by LGBTQ, um, authors in the LGBTQ community. So we're really excited to launch our library this year.
- Danielle: [02:47](#) That sounds really cool. So like if we want to donate a book to your library, how would we go about doing that?
- Jenn: [02:54](#) Uh, we're in the process right now of collecting books. So we're taking donations. Our library. We have an Amazon wishlist, but we're also taking gently used books from our local community as well as, um, our community far and wide. If you want to, you know, help us out by stocking our library with your favorite LGBTQ theme to book. You can do that by checking out our Amazon wishlist and we hope that once we get our lab up and running that we will be able to have a queer book clubs. And so we're just waiting to get all of our shelves filled up and then start reading and discussing books as a community.
- Danielle: [03:34](#) And if you are interested in helping Jenn and the Guilford Green Foundation out, you can find that information in our show notes. That's all excellent stuff.
- Amanda: [03:44](#) Jenn has also been a friend of ours for a very long time who we have always talked about books with. So Jenn, what's the favorite book that you have read this year?
- Jenn: [03:52](#) So my favorite book that I've read is Little Fires Everywhere by Celeste Ng. I love this book because it deals with family, family dynamics, culture class, you know, what family really means and it's all set and like suburbia in the nineties and so the author really uses like music and things like from what I grew up, which is a nice added element because it takes the phones and text messages kind of out of the story and has these kids interacting with each other and it is written from a team perspective, although it's not a white book, the main character is a team. It really digs into some deep issues but sets it in a really relatable settings for me anyway. I just. I loved it. It deals with some heavier topics, but absolutely a page turner could not put it down,

- Danielle: [04:46](#) and Jenn, I always associate you with really literary novels, which is why I thought this would be a great fit for you, so let's jump into *The Art of Escaping*. *The Art of Escaping* by Erin Callahan. It's about 17 year old Mattie who flies under the radar despite her parents push to be more exceptional and well rounded. The thing is she's only really ever had a passionate interest in escapology. When she works up the courage to seek out the daughter of a legendary escape artist, a new world is open to her, one of handcuffs in straight jackets and death defying stunts for a live audience. But when Will, her high school basketball team's golden boy, sees her perform, she feels like her secret is about to come crashing down around her. But Will has secrets too and Mattie learns that everyone's hiding their truest truths. So Amanda, what did you think of this book?
- Amanda: [05:36](#) I very much enjoyed this book. I really liked it from the beginning. I liked Mattie's voice. I thought it was a really unique voice for YA fiction that really showed her as a character out of time and a lot of sense and not just in the way we sometimes see where, oh, she really likes vintage dresses or whatever. I mean that was part of it as well, but I feel like her all around, uh, was a really good sort of out of time, teenager and will as well the way that his voice was written. So I really enjoyed that part of the book. Yeah, I felt that too. Like Mattie has a secret. Okay. Well you read books all the time about main characters who have secrets, but like how cool is it that her secret is that she does escapology. How about you Jenn? What did you think? Yeah,
- Jenn: [06:19](#) I really agree with this. I thought it was a really fresh perspective on a really common high school dynamics, like trope, you know, you had all the main characters in there. You had kind of the outsider girl in and Mattie. Yeah. The jock guy with Will you have the mean girl. Yeah. The smart girl, like everybody was represented from that trope, but it was really fresh perspective. It just, it didn't feel like I was reading the same story that I've read a thousand times.
- Danielle: [06:46](#) Yeah. I said to Amanda after I first read this, wow, I've never read anything like that, so it definitely lived up to the elevator pitch of like, Oh, this is a book where she wants to be an escape artist. Like I think about that and it still makes me smile. How creative. Yeah. So Amanda, you kind of hinted at this, but we have a split perspective book, so we have Will's narrative voice and Mattie's narrative voice, and then we also have interspersed diary entries written by Akiko who is the world renowned escape artist who has since passed away and her daughter, me, you becomes Mattie's mentor. So we have Akiko providing the historical context of escapology and kind of making the central metaphor really obvious, and I love this from her diary entry when she is doing an interview with a news show, the journalist says, do you ever get scared? Of course I replied with a smile. What I do is very risky, it can be a matter of life and death, but there's also a deep sense of

serenity. There's a moment just before I free myself. That feels so small and yet so big at the same time. It lasts for just a second, sometimes less, but it encompasses everything. And I love how Akiko provides this perspective on what escapology was to her and it provides us some grounding and framework to kind of understand where Mattie's coming from because Mattie's had this obsession for a long time with escapology. But like we haven't. So it's really cool that we get to like catch up through Akiko's perspective. Yeah, I like that a lot too. And I liked in general how Mattie sought out escapology. Like how she was interested in it for a long time but didn't actually seek it out until she lost some of her other safety nets. Like until she had this sad thing that was her best friend going off to nerd camp or whatever. And then she doesn't have anything to do with their summer. Uh, everyone's laughing at me for saying nerd camp, but it's not good. I went to nerd camp, I get to say nerd camp. So she goes and she seeks out Miyu who I really enjoyed. I thought she was a lot of fun character as this just prickly, agoraphobic mentor and one of my favorite quotes in the whole book that I laughed out loud when I read it was "Miyu scoffed, 'you think this is bad, wait until I try to cure you of your claustrophobia.' 'I don't have Claustrophobia.' 'That's what you think.'" I feel like this is like a perfect descript of her character

Jenn:

[09:22](#)

and I loved the Miyu character in general. But like, yeah, like that was pretty hard core. Like when you stop thinking about it like as this novel and like think about like this woman lock in a teenager in a trunk. I mean it's just bizarre, right? I think that's what makes the use of escapology in this novel. So interesting because it is just, there's nothing common about this. There is nothing like this that you normally read, you know, if you saw that on tv, like 'adult woman locks teenager in trunk to teach them the art of escapology', we would be like (high voice) "What is this person doing?", but in the context of this novel is just like wow, like, you know, this is how you learned lessons. Like sometimes you have to be pushed outside of your comfort zone to like really learn what your limits are and I just think that was a great way to show some growth in that area.

Danielle:

[10:18](#)

Yeah, I really loved that. I loved also the way that the author introduced Mattie's brother Kyle, who's just kind of this like underachieving dude who was a student athlete and then he blew out his knee. So he's adrift and you know, Mattie also has Stella who Amanda said went to Nerd camp and and just these like really focused characters that come in and out of the novel and it's not like 50 supporting characters. It's like four really good ones. I loved that level of concentration.

Jenn:

[10:51](#)

I agree with that. I really loved the character development of the supporting characters and I think the sibling relationship between Mattie and Kyle was like very well done.

Danielle: [11:03](#) Yeah, so I wrote on my notes, I'm just going to share this because I'm super proud of it y'all, but like I said, that the narrative was really tight and the world was rich in a small space and then I went, oh my God, it's like Claustrophobia. So like form following content. So smart.

Jenn: [11:21](#) That's an amazing observation

Amanda: [11:24](#) It's like the whole reason she started the podcast was so she could have strangers be like, oh, what a great point!

Jenn: [11:24](#) You're so smart.

Danielle: [11:28](#) So much insight.

Amanda: [11:29](#) An excellent pun.

Danielle: [11:30](#) Here's your cookie

Jenn: [11:31](#) or your homemade ice cream - from the last episode.

Danielle: [11:38](#) Call back! and with that friends will 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 The Art of Escaping and dig a little deeper.

Ad: [12:03](#) Support for this podcast comes from audible. Audible is offering listeners of the cafe, a free 30 day trial and a free audio book to get you started. Y'All. I love audio books. I listened to them all the time, whether I'm grocery shopping or in the car or on a walk with Pat Foot is just one more way to get more books in my day. Check us out audibletrial.com/yacafe. Happy reading!

Amanda: [12:30](#) Welcome back, y'all! It's time for Things We Like a Latte. Danielle, what's your choice this week?

Danielle: [12:33](#) Well, Amanda, I finished a great book, the loneliest girl in the universe by Lauren James. It is about a girl who is on a spaceship and we know from the jump that she's the only one on the spaceship. Her parents are dead. That's kind of like where we enter the story and it ticked all the boxes to be totally creepy to me. It gave me vibes of like the Martian by Andy Weir, which is really funny. Like so this book, you know, had some humor and she like, builds sculptures out of her empty food packets because she's so bored, right? But also hits of World War Z by Max Brooks, which is a fabulous book that everybody should read. It has nothing to do with the movie except for zombies, but that's a tangent, but there's this chapter in World War Z where during the Zombie apocalypse we get the pov of someone on the International Space Station watching the world be destroyed below and that's kind of the

vibe that I got from Loneliest Girl In the Universe and my heart just sort of like hurt for her and it was chilling but also funny. I don't know, the balance was just really fabulous on this novel Loneliest Girl In the Universe by Lauren James, how about you Jenn?

- Jenn: [13:49](#) So the thing that I Like A Latte this week is, so I finally bit the bullet and bought a robotic vacuum cleaner
- Danielle: [13:49](#) Yeah! Roomba!
- Jenn: [14:00](#) And I had put it off for a long time because I was like, wow, is it really gonna work? I mean, you know, it's my house really that dirty? And the answer is yes to both of those things. *laughter* Um, so I named my robotic vacuum cleaner. Her name is Buffy the Dust Bunny Slayer.
- Danielle: [14:00](#) Awwww, *laughter*.
- Jenn: [14:17](#) Yeah. And she's doing an amazing job. She's just a great new addition to our little family and I love having a robot vacuum my rugs now. It's amazing, everybody should get one.
- Danielle: [14:30](#) And how about you, Amanda?
- Amanda: [14:32](#) My favorite Pixar movie has always been the Incredibles. I love it so much, it's so fun. And Incredibles 2 to just came out. I don't know if you've heard, it's kinda like this indie release flick, *laughter* but it is SO good. I loved it as much as if not more than the original. Like, one of the things I love about the Incredibles is the way that they animate the superpowers and use the superpowers creatively. I really hate that in superhero movies often you have all of these incredibly powerful people who just like punch each other and throw each other around and I'm like, "That is not creative at all". Like, you have God like powers and you're just punching each other. But in Incredibles they really used the superpowers and it makes it such a visually engaging way of, like, telling the stories and communicating their powers and actually like, using the abilities that the superhero genre can give you that others genres cannot. And I definitely recommend it if you liked the first one, or if you're really into like great superhero movies. Incredibles 2. So much fun.
- Danielle: [15:31](#) We're going to take a quick break and when we come back we'll return to our discussion on The Art of Escaping. The rest of the show may contain spoilers, so if you're leaving us here, keep in touch on Instagram and Twitter @yacafepodcast. We'll be back after this quick break.
- Amanda: [16:03](#) Welcome back, y'all, to YA Cafe. We're continuing our discussion on The Art of Escaping by Erin Callahan. If you haven't read this yet, we want to

warn you again that this segment will contain spoilers.

- Danielle: [16:03](#) Spoilers!
- Amanda: [16:03](#) And drowning. Well, almost drowning.
- Danielle: [16:19](#) So, let's start off with Will's mysterious secret. This is hinted at in the blurb, and, Will has a secret. Whatever could it be?
- Jenn: [16:19](#) Will's gay!
- Danielle: [16:19](#) Whaaaaat?!
- Amanda: [16:32](#) Gasp! I don't like it. I mean, like, obviously I don't dislike that Will is gay. I tend to be okay with gay people, but like, uh, I don't like when (it's) a spoiler or a secret that a character is gay.
- Danielle: [16:42](#) Right, we talked about this in One of us Is Lying in episode 3.
- Amanda: [16:47](#) This definitely wasn't as bad as that.
- Jenn: [16:53](#) So, I have a different perspective on Will being gay. I definitely don't think it's like used as just a plot point. And maybe some of this just comes from, like, my own personal history, but I came out in high school and so I could really identify with Will's character and I don't know, I didn't see like his being gay as, you know, this plot point or like tokenism of the LGBTQ community. I saw it as a really real experience, um, really similar to my own growing up in, you know, a small southern town and knowing that I was gay, that was just very real for me, like, it was some of the things that I also experienced and I really liked this.
- Amanda: [17:36](#) Yeah, I mean I agree. I don't think it was just used as a plot point in general. It just kinda sits wrong with me when it's like a secret that is revealed about a character. Um, but I don't think it was done poorly in this book, I think it's other books, baggage that I'm bringing into it.
- Jenn: [17:36](#) Right.
- Amanda: [17:54](#) But I think that, like, Will's character was good. I don't think that he was like tokenized or anything like that. I'm just saying like the specifics of it being like a secret,
- Jenn: [18:03](#) But isn't that what coming out is all about? Like, you know, you come out and stages, right? Like, you don't just wake up one day and like literally burst out of your closet and "I'm queer, I'm here", you know, it took a lot of guts and courage for him to reveal that to Mattie, and he regretted it. Like, he had all these fears, like what does this mean? You

know, they made their mutual destruction pact. And so I really read his coming out as really realistic. Like, I thought it did a really good job of showing the progression of a teenager coming out.

- Danielle: [18:36](#) Yeah. So there is this moment that I really liked after he came out to Mattie, which was very challenging for him, he came out to Stella and he was like, "Oh, that was easy." So he had already kind of gotten to the point where it was a little bit easier for him. He does have Mattie to support him when he comes out to his parents and that goes decently and he recognizes that he has it better than a lot of kids in regards to his understanding parents. Um, the thing about his parents that he has always been hesitant about is not that they would like throw him out of the house, which is a very real concern for a lot of kids, but rather that his mom was so into transgressive culture that she kind of put (according to Will) Gay men on a pedestal. And as soon as he came out she was super excited that he would no longer be boring.
- Amanda: [19:32](#) I resent that as a boring gay person *laughter* or as a boring queer person.
- Danielle: [19:38](#) I definitely don't think that Will is a token. Will is a completely developed character. He is funny and that is so necessary because in this split narrative, Mattie is serious and focused and constantly thinking about escapology and you know, her adrift brother and things like that, and Will is like the breath of fresh air.
- Amanda: [20:02](#) I really liked in Will's narration, how even before you really know anything about him, he's like calling people like, "Oh, that's such a cool cat." I'm like, who is this guy?
- Danielle: [20:10](#) *laughter* Yeah, he's totally secure with his love of, like, vintage things, and jazz, and sewing. Like, he doesn't really like fashion, he likes physically constructing the clothing and I thought that that was really unique. And he loves Mattie. Like, he didn't really talk to her before at school, but once he sees her act, which he has been dragged along to by his parents who are totally into counter culture, once he sees her act, he's like hypnotized by her self confidence and her way of being. "That's the magic of Mattie. She resides at that strange little waystation between stark reality and larger than life fantasy. She wants so much more than 'just the facts, ma'am'. She lives for those miraculous moments when you stumble upon something that somehow truer than truth."
- Jenn: [20:10](#) Great quote.
- Danielle: [21:03](#) Yeah. I just love that he, like, sees her in this way. I definitely don't think she sees herself in this way.

Jenn: [21:07](#) No, and I think that's one of the things that I like about the split perspectives of this book, is that we all have feelings about ourselves and it's hard to think about how other people will see us. But I think this book does an excellent job of showing, like, some of the same events from multiple perspectives so that you really understand, you know, how each character sees themselves and then how their actions are perceived by the other people in the book. And I think that the actual, like, first time that they sit in the car together and Will comes out to her after he sees Mattie's first escape act, I think that's a perfect example. They had very different perspectives of how that event went and that's one of the things that I like so much about this book.

Amanda: [21:56](#) Can we talk about the actual escapes?

Jenn: [21:56](#) Yes!

Amanda: [22:02](#) Because I think she should have failed one. Thoughts?

Jenn: [22:04](#) Well, would she have died if she had failed one?

Amanda: [22:07](#) No! I mean, they would've fished her out.

Danielle: [22:08](#) You mean like failed one of her live audience escapes?

Amanda: [22:12](#) Yeah, I mean like, it felt like, I don't know ...

Jenn: [22:14](#) It did seem a little unrealistic that she was so good at it, like, so fast

Danielle: [22:19](#) No, because she spent hours and hours and hours and hours practicing, y'all. Like, so Miyu threw her in the pool with weights on. Like, that's practice. All the times that Miyu - it really sounds like there's like an abusive relationship here - but all the times that Miyu is like "Pick all the locks on this table before you can have dinner", like, that's all practice.

Amanda: [22:19](#) Yeah.

Jenn: [22:19](#) That's true.

Amanda: [22:43](#) But I still, it just generally lowered the stakes. Like, as the book went on I felt myself less and less wrapped in it because I felt the stakes getting lower and lower. Because you know she's not gonna screw up the last escape when her brother's there to see. With every escape that she does successfully, you know that like at no point is it going to really get hard for her. Like, and I think everything just worked out too well for her. So it kind of pulled me away from the book, like, I stopped being, like, worried with her success and relationships and things because everything was just working out.

- Danielle: [23:16](#) I mean, the first escape almost failed, right? When she saw Will in the audience and she freaked out and she dropped her bobby pin, and like, took time to get together and that was an almost failure and even Miyu said like, "I was totally nervous for you. You can't go back in there." And Mattie was like, "No, I have to do this."
- Jenn: [23:37](#) For me it was the almost failures that really worked. Like, I think if all her escapes had gone off without a hitch, like, that would have been really. But what I really liked besides the fact that the escapes were, like they said before, just a really cool way to tell this story. I think what I liked most was that in every state there was a point in time where Mattie, you know, panicked a little bit or had a little bit of doubt and had to like calm herself and go back to, you know, that muscle memory from training. But what that conveyed to the audience was this level of like, vulnerability. And so I really liked that. It made me think about it as more than a stunt and like, really think about escapology as an art form.
- Danielle: [24:23](#) Yeah, I agree. And you know the metaphor, Mattie's escaping, but it's nice. It's a fun metaphor.
- Amanda: [24:33](#) *singing* Dani can't you see? Escaping is a metaphor."
- Danielle: [24:39](#) *laughter* Alright, before we, kind of, leave this podcast, I know this didn't go organically in our conversation about Will's sexuality and LGBTQ representation in literature, but I did want to shout out a great article that I found this week. Melinda Lo, the author of *Ash* and other great books has compiled just an enormous amount of data over the last like six or seven years and she presents it in a piece called *LGBTQ YA By the Numbers*. And she basically charts the number of LGBTQ+ main characters in YA fiction from the five major publishing houses over the last six or seven years. So we are definitely seeing growth in representation but there's still more to do. And I think one of the things that catches you up, Amanda, is like, if this were one of a thousand stories with a gay boy, it's very different, but we still have, like, the weight of representation each time we see a queer character.
- Amanda: [25:46](#) Also, one of the things about the article that you mentioned that is worth pointing out is that we're getting a lot better with gay white cis boy representation, and not so great with a lot of other things.
- Danielle: [25:59](#) Right. So Melinda Lo goes and she charts, you know, like we have this label which is "LGBTQ Books", but like how many of them are "T" books, or "Q" books? We have a lot of "G" books, like a lot of Simon's, right? And Simon is great, but he's not the only story.
- Amanda: [25:59](#) Yeah.

Jenn: [26:17](#) Yeah, Dani you're absolutely right. I mean that article you read makes a very valid point because Trans women and people of color or face, like, higher rates of suicide and violence against them. And so if we're not telling their stories then you know, we're really doing a disservice to our community.

Danielle: [26:40](#) And that's our show for today, friends. Thank you so much for joining us, Jenn.

Amanda: [26:40](#) Yay, Jenn.

Jenn: [26:45](#) Yay, thank you for having me.

Danielle: [26:46](#) You can find out more about Jenn's projects at Guilford Green Foundation.org. You can find us on Instagram and Twitter @yacafepodcast, we'd love to hear from you, and if you're enjoying the show, please leave us a review in iTunes. Happy reading!