



YA Café Podcast

Episode 19: *Trail of Lightning*

28 June 2019

- Danielle: [00:02](#) Welcome to the YA Cafe where we share conversations about books for teachers, readers, and caffeine addicts everywhere. On today's episode, we'll be talking about *Trail of Lightning* by Rebecca Roanhorse. Grab a mug of your favorite beverage, friends, and let's talk books.
- Ad: [00:17](#) Do you have a product you'd like to get in front of teachers, librarians, and other book lovers? If so, email us at yacafepodcast@gmail.com.
- Danielle: [00:26](#) 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 the new novel yet. I'm Danielle Hall, an 8th and 9th grade English teacher and I blog at TeachNouvelle.com. I'm joined by Leila Hobbs, our most awesome and beloved, fiddle playing, trivia winning friend. Hi Leila!
- Leila: [00:26](#) Hi Danielle!
- Danielle: [00:26](#) Glad to have you back.
- Leila: [00:47](#) I'm happy to be back!
- Danielle: [00:50](#) *Trail of Lightning* by Rebecca Roanhorse begins the saga of *The Sixth World*. In this post apocalyptic landscape, the Dinetah have survived the rising waters of climate change and are shaping the world anew. Gods, heroes, and monsters walk freely in the new world. Maggie, a monster hunter with supernatural abilities, has been called in to find a missing child and what she finds is more horrifying than anything she's encountered before. The plot thickens and Maggie must team up with a young medicine man, Kai, to try and solve the growing mystery. So first of all, before we jump in, if you are new to this podcast, Leila and I are super white.
- Leila: [00:50](#) Super white. Like, I don't tan.
- Danielle: [01:31](#) *laughter* So we are going to do our best to talk about things as respectfully and responsibly as we can. Uh, but if we get it wrong, just, like, email us and tell us and we'll apologize. That being said, super white Leila, what were your first impressions of the novel?
- Leila: [01:49](#) I loved it. I was hooked from page two. I want to read a quote from page two that just sort of, like, drew me in. And this is Maggie's sort of, inner monologue. She says, "I'm no hero. I'm more of a last resort, a scorched earth policy. I'm the person you hire when the heroes have already come home in body bags."
- Danielle: [02:10](#) I love that too. I loved Maggie's voice. I loved, you know how real and cynical

she was. I loved the reluctant hero.

- Leila: [02:22](#) Yeah, like, she's a bad ass, but she's also very anxious. She doesn't feel like a bad ass, she feels like a failure.
- Danielle: [02:22](#) Right, she has imposter syndrome.
- Leila: [02:22](#) Yeah.
- Danielle: [02:31](#) And some other issues that we'll jump into in the spoiler section. So we have this great Navajo setting and Rebecca Roanhorse really grounded her fantasy, or her post-apocalyptic novel in traditional myths and legends. You know, the blurb says like 'all of the old gods heroes and monsters have come to walk the earth', so she's not inventing things here. She's like, reimagining them in a futuristic setting. So Rebecca Roahorse is Pueblo and African-American, but she spent two years on the Navajo reservation, she did a lot of research and listened to people's stories. And one of the things that really struck me when I heard her say it in an interview was that she chose traditional stories that had already kind of been earmarked for public consumption.
- Leila: [03:25](#) Yeah. So some of the characters in the book like, the Changing Woman and the archetype of the Hero Twins, they're going to be familiar to you if you've ever read any Navajo folklore.
- Danielle: [03:34](#) Absolutely. And if you haven't, we'll link to some in the show notes. So I thought all of these roots in folklore made for a really interesting story and also kind of lent themselves to a bigger conversation on genre.
- Leila: [03:50](#) Yeah. So I definitely walked away from this book, like not wanting to put it in a particular box. Like, it didn't necessarily read like YA or typical fantasy books because it was very sort of dystopian, almost like The Road-esque. So it doesn't just fit neatly into one genre box for sure.
- Danielle: [04:08](#) Yeah, and in the same interview that I was listening to with Rebecca Roanhorse, she mentioned that the Navajo storytellers don't really classify their stories as like, 'Oh this is myth, and this is reality, and this is fantasy', but rather it's all sort of the experience. And so when she's building on that foundation and that tradition, it's then very complicated to turn around and be like, 'okay, now I have to put it on the right bookshelf'.
- Leila: [04:38](#) Yeah. And I mean, technically this is set in the future so we don't know what's going to happen in 2090. Like, some of the things that she talks about, uh, she references, like, protests of the Keystone pipeline, and like, we're already having, you know, energy wars and water shortages, uh, global warming, like sea levels rising is already happening. This could be what the world looks like in a hundred years.
- Danielle: [05:01](#) Right. It's not necessarily fantasy. It could just be clairvoyant literature. Clairvoyant, indigenous futurism for young adults. *laughter*

- Danielle: [05:13](#) I also wanted to say there is an audio book coming out soon, and I'm excited because they have hired an indigenous reader and one of the things that the book is going to contain is a Navajo pronunciation guide.
- Leila: [05:28](#) Which will be very helpful for us white people, boat people.
- Danielle: [05:33](#) *laughter* Yeah. And in the book already, there are a lot of things that aren't translated, which I really appreciated, um, even though I was on the outside, like, you know, I can Google, it's fine. So it'll be really fascinating to hear all of that in an indigenous voice.
- Leila: [05:50](#) Yeah, I definitely want to listen to it. I'm also really stoked, I didn't realize when I started this book that it was book one of a four book series, but now that I've finished it, I am really excited to read the rest of them. I mean it does stand on its own, uh, I would still recommend it even if you're not really into reading, like, a long series. But I think after you finish it you're going to be like, 'okay, book 2!'
- Danielle: [06:13](#) Yeah, absolutely. And we did want to thank Saga Press, who gave us a review copy of this book. We really enjoyed it, thanks for letting us review. And with that friends, we'll take our first break. When we come back, we'll share about Things We Like A Latte, then we'll return to our discussion of Trail of Lightning and dig a little deeper.
- Ad: [06:49](#) Hey y'all, it's Danielle. Do you want to support this podcast and check out a book we've recommended? Audible is offering YA Cafe listeners a free audio book download with a free 30 day trial to give you the opportunity to check out their service. You can check out the audio book for Little Fires Everywhere by Celeste Ng, which Jen recommended last week. Remember that she said that it was an awesome transgenerational narrative about love and family set in suburbia in the nineties. I love audio books. I can listen to them anywhere, in the car, at the grocery store or on a walk with Padfoot. It's just one more way to get more books in my day. To download your free audio book today go to audibletrial.com/yacafe. Happy reading!
- Danielle: [07:33](#) Welcome back, y'all, it's time for Things We Like A Latte. Leila, what's your brew of choice this week?
- Leila: [07:35](#) So my thing I Like A Latte is a TED talk from 2013 by Dr Gary Slutkin called "Let's Treat Violence Like A Contagious Disease". I listened to it a couple months ago, but I was reminded of it by some quotes in this book talking about, like, evil infecting people. So Dr. Gary Slutkin is an epidemiologist who was working in Africa treating cholera and tuberculosis outbreaks. He came back to the US to take a break and sort of accidentally stumbled upon this new model for how to treat violence. So he was looking at maps of violent crimes, specifically homicides, and he was seeing how they clustered much in the way in his words like a cholera epidemic will cluster, and he was talking about how they also happen in waves and how like, the biggest indicator that you will catch tuberculosis is being exposed to someone with tuberculosis. And the biggest indicator of violent crimes happening was other violent crimes happening. Like, homicides don't exist in a vacuum, they tend to create more violence in the

wake of them. He also makes them really good comparisons to, like, how we used to think that many diseases were caused by, like, being possessed by a demon or having like bad humors or just being like a bad person in general. And he kind of compares that to the way that we talk about criminals and violence, like, 'bad people do bad things and they should be punished for it'. And so kind of the goal, this model is to, in his words, bring us out of the Middle Ages and reframe the way that we talk about violence. And I just want to be clear that in no way is Gary Slutkin suggesting that his model is a panacea for all of the ills of society. It is not intended to replace or gloss over, like, the very real issues of economic disparity, racism, uh, militarization of the police, the rise of for profit prisons, and it is certainly not a substitute for meaningful gun control. But, it is a tool that is being studied and adopted by many different communities and organizations worldwide, and it's having some really positive outcomes like 30 to 70% drops in homicides in neighborhoods that have been targeted by his model.

- Danielle: [09:38](#) That's really amazing. So that is the TED talk by Dr Gary Slutkin
- Leila: [09:44](#) Called "Treating violence like a contagious disease".
- Danielle: [09:44](#) Awesome.
- Leila: [09:46](#) And we will link to that in our show notes. What about you, Danielle? What's your thing that you Like A Latte?
- Danielle: [09:51](#) My thing this week is a new anthology. It is A Thousand Beginnings and Endings edited by Ellen Oh and Elsie Chapman. It is 15 retellings of Asian myths and legends, and when I first asked to read this book and Harper Collins sent it to me, I was so excited because I thought that I would be getting like 15 stories that were kind of in a fairy tale voice and kind of transportative in that way, but this is actually so much more because it's 15 traditional stories, but the settings are anything but traditional fairytale settings. They're like, set in the future and there's androids in one, or one is set in the Wild West and has ghosts in it, and I just love the variety in here, all of the different voices. And of course after each story there is like a little blurb, like 'here's the original that I used to inspire my spin on an old classic', and I love it so much and I strongly recommend it.
- Leila: [10:59](#) That sounds fascinating.
- Danielle: [11:01](#) Thank you. So I'm going to link to that in the show notes too.
- Danielle: [11:04](#) We're going to take a quick break and when we come back we'll return to our discussion on Trail of Lightning. 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.
- Danielle: [11:39](#) Welcome back, y'all, to the YA Cafe. We're continuing our discussion on Trail of Lightning by Rebecca Roanhorse. If you haven't read this yet, we want to warn you again that this segment will contain spoilers.

Leila: [11:39](#) Spoilers! And Gollums

Danielle: [11:39](#) Gollums? *laughter*

Leila: [11:39](#) And golems!

Danielle: [11:39](#) And golems.

Leila: [11:56](#) Not Smeagol from Lord of the Rings.

Danielle: [11:59](#) Not Gollums, golems. Alright. So yeah, I mean, I didn't even know how to talk about the monsters in the non spoiler section because I feel like pretty much from the jump plot happens, right?

Leila: [12:13](#) Yeah. That's like the first monster hunt that she goes on in the book, she encounters one of these golems. Um, and I thought that that was a really neat monster to have her fighting because it's not something that I knew was part of Navajo folklore. I think a lot of people associate golems with like, Jewish folklore, so it was really interesting to ...

Danielle: [12:34](#) To see like the, I don't want to say 'universals' in mythology, but how, kind of, different cultures can have stories that arrive at the same place.

Leila: [12:44](#) Yeah, absolutely. I also think it made it just a more fresh read than if she had been fighting like Wendigos, or a Rougarou.

Danielle: [12:51](#) Absolutely. And these things were scary and one of the things that I noticed reading, like, I kept thinking, 'Oh yeah, this is a funny book' because Maggie is funny, but it was also scary.

Leila: [13:05](#) Yeah, it was very, I got chills in a few spots, um, especially there's the scene that she keeps having dreams or like kind of future flashbacks to, uh, on the Black Mesa when they talk about the sky being green and black bodies on the ground, like, charred bodies. It was very like, *shuddering*

Danielle: [13:23](#) Yeah, it was a totally immersive experience for sure. And I love this thing that we find out about Maggie, which is that her clan powers is to be a gifted killer.

Leila: [13:23](#) Yes, she is a Living Arrow.

Danielle: [13:39](#) And I love this quote that really shows how she thinks about herself, she says to Kai, "I'm more gun than hammer. I'm a weapon specifically meant for killing", and Kai (because he's awesome) says, "A gun then Maggie, but one that can be used to protect just as much as destroy, or neither. Melt down a gun to its essence and all you have is metal that can be shaped into anything you want. Nothing says you can't do the same." And I love that he's trying to show her how to be, I don't know, like, be her best self, but like ...

Leila: [14:16](#) Yeah. Like, at one point he kind of gets a sad look on his face and he's like, "Who told you that this was all you could be?" Like, "Who told you that you could only

be a killer?" And I was just like, "Oh, I love you."

- Danielle: [14:16](#) Yeah.
- Leila: [14:16](#) Marry me!
- Danielle: [14:30](#) *laughter* I definitely loved that too. I love that she has this voice in her life that's like, "Look, okay, you have these clan powers, but that's not all you are, or will be"
- Leila: [14:41](#) Right. Early on in the book, Neizghani says something about how evil can infect you and kind of turn you into a monster and like, that's part of Maggie's worry in her internal monologue is that because she kills monsters that she is being infected by evil and that she is going to turn evil. And Kai is like, 'no'.
- Danielle: [15:05](#) Right. And that's kind of the tragic thing about the first interaction we have with Maggie being a monster hunter. She finds the kidnapped girl but the kidnapped girl's been bitten, and so Maggie kills her as like a mercy kill because she believes that the girl is, like, destined to become a monster. And I don't think it's like super clear whether or not that really would have happened.
- Leila: [15:30](#) She probably would have bled to death though.
- Danielle: [15:33](#) Right. But I mean like, becoming a monster.
- Leila: [15:33](#) Yeah.
- Danielle: [15:36](#) Because as the story continued, I really thought that that was more like, a metaphor for Maggie's own, like 'touched by evilness'.
- Leila: [15:45](#) Yeah, definitely. I don't, I don't think in the book, like, if the golems bite you, I don't think you'd become a golem. Because a golem is something that is created, you know, it's animated by like, a witch or a, like a magical person. They're not like zombies. They would never, we're people.
- Danielle: [16:02](#) Right, but it's sort of like Maggie in killing the girl at the very beginning was sort of writing her off and writing off her future, and that sort of what Neizghani did to Maggie.
- Leila: [16:15](#) Yeah. He was like, "Oh, you are evil. You are just, like, an instrument, and like one day I'm going to have to kill you because you're going to be out of control."
- Danielle: [16:27](#) Right. So, we have a fantastic character in this book. It's Coyote, the trickster God, and I totally bought into this from the jump. I'm like, 'yes, this is going to be great.' We can't believe anything he says, but he's also really funny and really awesome. So we want to believe him.
- Leila: [16:45](#) Yeah, I love the way he was written because it was like, very humorous and he's presented in this kind of flashy way, but also very sinister. Um, like, Maggie talks about getting glimpses of like, his true face or like, when he turns around, like,

she'll see his tail for a moment or she'll see his ears. And even though he is really funny, you never know what his motives are.

- Danielle: [17:10](#) Right. You can never trust him and I think that it's interesting the whole time because Maggie never trusts him, she gets the glimpses you were talking about, but at the same time she fails to remain skeptical.
- Leila: [17:24](#) Yeah. She gets, I think a little too hopeful that he is going to be the answer to all of her problems.
- Danielle: [17:31](#) And I thought that was so beautiful because it was like, 'okay, even if you know something is bad for you and even if you know that you shouldn't trust such and such toxic relationship in your life, you can still get sucked back in to the habit of loving liking a person'.
- Leila: [17:50](#) Right. And she had a couple of those moments too with Neizghani. At one point I was worried, I was like, 'oh no, are they going to get back together?'
- Danielle: [17:58](#) Oh my goodness. I was like, 'girl, don't even.'
- Leila: [17:58](#) Yeah, like, you have Kai
- Danielle: [18:03](#) who is great
- Leila: [18:04](#) Who is great! And he even has a quote in the book where he's like, 'a person who loves you would never hurt you like that'.
- Danielle: [18:09](#) What is that saying? Like, the guy who's worth your tears will never make you cry.
- Leila: [18:14](#) Yeah. Or Mr Rogers
- Danielle: [18:14](#) Awwww
- Leila: [18:17](#) Who said that love is an active verb, it requires action.
- Danielle: [18:17](#) Mr Rogers!
- Leila: [18:17](#) Yeah.
- Danielle: [18:23](#) We also have a character in this book who comes in at the end, and her name is Mosi and she runs this ...
- Leila: [18:23](#) Supernatural casino?
- Danielle: [18:33](#) Yeah! Okay, that's great. She, yeah, she's like a casino owner, but it's a supernatural casino. There are fights, and there are things, and of course like the house always wins, right? Everybody knows, but Maggie forgets. And so she made this deal, for those of you who are, like, bravely listening to this, even if you haven't read the book yet, like, she makes this deal because she needs to

get the firestick from Mosi and Mosi says, 'okay, well you can have it if you fight in the last fight of the night'. And Maggie's like, 'sure, I'll fight your fight.' And all of us readers are like, 'okay, you did not set out the terms of the negotiations'.

- Leila: [18:33](#) Right.
- Danielle: [19:09](#) You did not use clear language. This person, this is, like, a cat person. Cats cannot be trusted.
- Leila: [19:18](#) *laughter* No. She's always moving around. She's like, portrayed as very shifty. She never stops walking, like, eyes never stopped moving.
- Danielle: [19:24](#) Right. You cannot trust this Being, yet Maggie did and it turns out it's a fight to the death, which is terrible, and then it turns out
- Leila: [19:34](#) That the person she's fighting is Neizghani!
- Danielle: [19:39](#) Ahh. And drama ensues. And I felt that this was really, like, this is kind of one of those things like we talked about in (The) Hazelwood, how our protagonist in (The) Hazelwood is genre savvy, but the protagonist in (The) Hazelwood ends up being, like, literally part of the story. And so Maggie is like, aware of stories, but she's not aware of the story that she's in.
- Leila: [20:04](#) Yeah, she is not genre savvy enough to know not to trust, or, I mean she knows not to trust them, but I think she just thinks it's worth the risk, I don't know.
- Danielle: [20:04](#) Or she's super impulsive.
- Leila: [20:18](#) Yeah, *laughter* I think she signed up for the fight because she was like, 'Psh! Whoever it is, I can take 'em!'
- Danielle: [20:22](#) And she does have bloodlust it's part of her clan powers.
- Leila: [20:22](#) Right.
- Danielle: [20:27](#) But I thought that that was really kind of, just, a fascinating moment in terms of like, 'okay, this character knows about stories, but also can be super dumb'. So, Book 2, Storm of Locusts comes out in 2019.
- Leila: [20:44](#) I'm so here for that. I am very, very excited. I guess I will have to amuse myself with the audiobook of Trail of Lightning in the meantime, but, I can't wait.
- Danielle: [20:53](#) Also, can we get a TV show? I feel like this would be a stellar TV show.
- Leila: [20:56](#) Yeah, that would be very lit. Also a great way to showcase some, maybe, actors that are being passed over. Like, if we could have a cast that was actual native people and not white people with tans.
- Danielle: [21:11](#) Right. We want an all indigenous cast for this awesome TV show that doesn't exist yet, but totally should.

Leila: [21:11](#) Yes, please.

Danielle: [21:20](#) That's our show for today, friends. Thank you so much for joining me, Leila.

Leila: [21:24](#) Thanks for having me back!

Danielle: [21:26](#) You can find us on instagram and twitter @yacafepodcast, we'd love to hear from you! And if you're enjoying the show, leave us a review on iTunes. Happy reading!