



YA Café Podcast

Episode 22: *Hullmetal Girls*

19 July 2018

- 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 *Hullmetal Girls* by Emily's Skrutskie. Grab a mug of your favorite beverage, friends, and let's talk books. at
- 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. N-o-u-v-e-l-l-e ELA, something new.
- Amanda: [00:33](#) 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 Amanda Thrasher
- Danielle: [00:41](#) And I'm Danielle Hall, an 8th and 9th grade English teacher and I blog at Teachnouvelle.com. In Emily's Skrutskie's new Scifi novel *Hullmetal Girls* humanity has spent centuries in a fleet of starships searching for a new planet. We follow two protagonists, one from a background of poverty, the other from a background of privilege as they are transformed into cyborg weapons for the fleet's oppressive army. They have to learn to work together and decide whether to stand with their programming and the general body or with the rebellious Fractionists, and try not to kill each other along the way. All right. Amanda, what do you think?
- Amanda: [01:15](#) I thought there was a lot to like about this book. I really enjoyed the world building, I thought that a lot of the characters were engaging and I liked all of their different motivations that lead them forward. Uh, plot wise, not a lot there that I loved, but I think that the world building and the characters made up for that for me. What about you?
- Danielle: [01:32](#) I liked it a lot too. I liked that we had this pod of four Scela and they kind of did a mind-meld thing. They like, work together as a team. I thought it was a cool idea and I really loved getting to know the characters in the pod.
- Amanda: [01:51](#) So as far as the characters in the pod, one of the things that I really liked about it was all of these characters go through this very dangerous medical procedure where they are attached to this robotic, artificial intelligent outer shell. As far as I read it. Is that how you read it as well?
- Danielle: [02:11](#) Yeah. So the Exosystem or the Exo as they call it in the book does have the AI and it even kind of has a personality.

Amanda: [02:17](#) A little bit. You mentioned that, I didn't see that as much. I think that the different parts of the Exo that we saw were the different characters responding to the AI. So like different sides of the AI came out in each of these characters.

Danielle: [02:31](#) Ooooh, that makes a lot of sense. So like Aisha talked about her Exo, like, exerting its will against her will

Amanda: [02:38](#) Because she was fighting it a lot of the time.

Danielle: [02:40](#) Yeah, that makes sense, and then Woojin - who is not a perspective character, but he's in the pod with them - he describes to them his Exo feeling 'loose'. And I thought that that was a really fascinating idea too. So they have like different relationships with the Exo.

Amanda: [03:00](#) Yeah. I think Woojin was really interesting for a couple reasons. One, because apparently there was some kind of malfunction whenever he was attached to this exoskeleton and so that was part of the reason that his connection was less stable than the others, but another part of it that I think probably played into his connection with the AI was that Woojin was pretty much given the choice of jail or Exo. And so he chose the Exo, so like really, although he did consent to it ...

Danielle: [03:00](#) Not a choice,

Amanda: [03:00](#) Not really a choice.

Danielle: [03:30](#) Yeah. And that's kind of, I mean we learned really early on in this novel that it's a dystopian setup, I mean you cannot have a socially-stratified system and this sort of monetary incentive to become part of a cyborg police force without having, like, governmental control involved.

Amanda: [03:54](#) Yeah. I mean they lived in numbered districts, like, where have we seen that before?

Danielle: [03:58](#) I feel like you, you're giving her a lot of crap for her numbered districts, but like ...

Amanda: [04:02](#) There's just so many numbered districts *laughter*

Danielle: [04:08](#) And they talk about tiers in this book too, which I thought made a lot more sense than districts because the ships actually have physical tiers, like the upper tier and the lower tier,

Amanda: [04:08](#) Oh, like the decks, yeah.

Danielle: [04:08](#) But they're called tiers!

Amanda: [04:25](#) I know, Dani! *laughter* Yeah, I think that's in there too. And I also really liked the way that the different classes were kind of grouped on different ships. You

know where Aisha's from is like the 'poor ship' where like, children go work in the dye factory like ...

- Danielle: [04:41](#) Right. I don't really understand what they're dying, but they're dying things red, so it's, it's a symbol. Red Hands, children with red hands, the blood of our youth.
- Amanda: [04:50](#) Wow. All children are culpable.
- Danielle: [04:53](#) No, I didn't say the children are culpable.
- Amanda: [04:53](#) Oh you just meant, okay.
- Danielle: [04:53](#) Oh, because blood *on* their hands.
- Amanda: [04:53](#) Yeah.
- Danielle: [05:00](#) That's not what I meant. I meant like the blood of, you know like 'a lamb to the slaughter', right?
- Amanda: [05:05](#) I thought you meant like, all children are responsible for the horrors of the fleet. *laughter*
- Danielle: [05:14](#) So there was a part of this book that I thought was going to go in a Divergent direction, right? Once they're Scela they have training to do and I thought
- Amanda: [05:14](#) Cue the montage!
- Danielle: [05:25](#) Yeah, I thought we were going to get a montage and there was going to be like some of the Divergent series dynamic with the training.
- Amanda: [05:33](#) You know, that I read Divergent on the way to bootcamp? *laughter* It was weird. It was like a weird time to read Divergent.
- Danielle: [05:39](#) Did you have the Divergent montages going through your head in bootcamp?
- Amanda: [05:42](#) No, there's not a lot going through your head in bootcamp. *laughter*
- Danielle: [05:48](#) Um, but one thing I missed out on was that the montage didn't like, loop all the way in, like, there was a little bit of training and then the force was like, 'we need you, you have to go right now before you're fully trained to interact with humans. But no worries. I'm sure it'll be fine.'
- Amanda: [06:05](#) I thought that was fine. Like yeah, it was hard to believe, but I mean it was, like, a vehicle to get the plot moving. Like, you've read training montages before, you don't need another one. You know what happens.
- Danielle: [06:15](#) It wasn't even that I thought it was hard to believe, like, I found it very believable that they would rush this militarized police force through the gamut without proper training on how to interact with humans. I found that incredibly believable.

- Amanda: [06:32](#) Fair, **laughter** but I'm not sure, I'm not sure what your critique of that in the book is, like, I thought it was just expediting plot because, like, the story wasn't about their training.
- Danielle: [06:38](#) No, I don't have a critique of it in that particular way, I think that it created a lot of tension and I believe that Emily Skrutski did this intentionally. These are very strong cyborgs, they have a lot of strength now, but they haven't been recalibrated to deal with humans with empathy. Like, that's a source of tension. I loved it and it kinda just gave me low level anxiety the entire time I was reading this. I was waiting for them to kill an unarmed human, you know?
- Amanda: [07:11](#) Yeah. I really liked it for a very specific reason that if this had like all of their training in it, it would almost definitely be a series, but it's not, it's a standalone. It's one book from start to finish and I cannot tell you how much I love that.
- Danielle: [07:31](#) **laughter** Absolutely. Uh, it's one book and it's not even long, like it's a normal sized book. Thank you, Emily Skrutskie. 300 something pages and on the low end of something like 310.
- Amanda: [07:41](#) Like the right amount of pages.
- Danielle: [07:45](#) Yeah. Okay, so we've nerded out about the page number here.
- Amanda: [07:49](#) That's our nuanced review, you're welcome. From YA Cafe "The right number of pages". **laughter**
- Amanda: [07:56](#) One other thing that I wanted to talk about was Aisha's religion. I really liked the way this was portrayed Aisha was a Ledic, which is sort of like, some kind of descendant of Isla, it seemed to be to me. Would you agree?
- Danielle: [07:56](#) Yes.
- Amanda: [08:12](#) There's a lot of, like, references to the headscarf and like wearing the headscarf as a sign of mourning, I believe was it was, um, and I just really liked it because like she was always sort of in tune with like, even when she was a Scela, she still turned to prayer when she was stressed and like, sometimes the other people in her little Exo who had to, like, share her thoughts were annoyed by it, but it was still who she was and what she turned to, and I really liked that detail.
- Danielle: [08:39](#) I agree, I really liked that too. And in terms of small details that weren't super developed but still deserve a shout out, there is a trans member of the pod. I thought that this was such a great detail even though it wasn't a huge detail because it talks about Praava's starting hormones and her sister Ratna's support for her. So even though Praava wasn't a perspective character, because of the mind melding we do get some of Praava's voice. So a little bit of representation there. 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 Hullmetal Girls and dig a little deeper.
- New Speaker: [08:39](#) Music break

Ad: [09:36](#) Hey y'all, are you sitting there thinking 'this podcast is awesome!' Well, here's how to support us AND our authors', pre-order our book choices through our Amazon affiliate links. We'll get a small kickback and the preorders count towards an author's first week totals, everybody wins. Next week we're going to discuss *When Life Gives You Demons* by Jennifer Honeybourn. If you'd like to help us keep bringing you great content, pre-order through the link in our show notes. Happy reading!

Amanda: [09:36](#) Welcome back, y'all! It's time for Things We Like A Latte. Danielle, what's your brew of choice this week?

Danielle: [10:12](#) Well, Amanda, I went to a conference this week, a teaching conference in Nashville, but I got to have dinner with the extremely talented, extremely fabulous Amanda K. Morgan.

Amanda: [10:27](#) I'm a lot jealous.

Danielle: [10:28](#) I know you are, but I invited you so ...

Amanda: [10:31](#) I don't need that negativity in my life.

Danielle: [10:31](#) *laughter*

Amanda: [10:33](#) Just tell us what's making you happy!

Danielle: [10:40](#) She's making me happy. Um, Amanda K Morgan was on our podcast on episode 13 or something and we also reviewed one of her books on the podcast and you know, she's of course been your friend for a long time and now she's my friend-in-law. We had very spicy Thai food, we both cried. No shame.

Amanda: [10:54](#) From the Thai food, right?

Danielle: [10:55](#) Yes. How about you, Amanda? What's your brew of choice this week?

Amanda: [11:00](#) So while you were gone, I took the opportunity to watch dark TV shows that you don't want to watch with me. So I watched a lot of *Westworld*.

Danielle: [11:00](#) Ooooo!

Amanda: [11:07](#) But that's not what's making me happy. What is making me happy is sort of an offshoot of *Westworld* where it kind of threw me into a wormhole of the ethics of artificial intelligence.

Danielle: [11:16](#) Oh, this is perfect for this book!

Amanda: [11:19](#) Yeah, so it works out very well. And there is a lot. Um, like if you just Google 'ethics of artificial intelligence', there's some about, like, how we treat robots, but there's a lot more like 'how do we make artificial intelligence not racist?'. Which is a huge problem apparently where they'll take like some kind of predictive technology and like, the artificial intelligence will more often say that

black people are more likely to commit crimes. So like, the artificial intelligence is taking the implicit bias from, like, it's programmers and from the sources that it uses and, like, trying to sort that out is a huge part of making artificial intelligence not evil, first of all, and also figuring out, like, should there be safeguards? We're not to that point yet, but we're gonna be in our lifetime.

- Danielle: [12:07](#) I think we are to that point. I mean we talk about facial recognition and it's already racist.
- Amanda: [12:15](#) Yeah. So like, racism definitely is present in AI but at the moment, like, AI does not have the capacity to evolve to like, do damage to people intentionally. That's what I'm talking about. But like we probably will be in our lifetime. Not in the next five years, but definitely in the next 30, in just the way that all of that is developing, I just found really fascinating. So I fell into a Google wormhole. I read a lot about Elon Musk who is sure that robots are about to come destroy us and yeah, it was an interesting afternoon. So I recommend falling into an AI ethics wormhole if you are just a little bit curious about that.
- Danielle: [12:46](#) And we will provide some starter links for you to launch into that wormhole. We're going to take a quick break and when we come back we'll return to our discussion on Hullmetal Girls. The rest of the show will contain spoilers, and AI. So if you're leaving us here and keep in touch on Instagram and Twitter @yacafepodcast, we'll be back!
- Amanda: [13:25](#) Welcome back, y'all, to the YA Cafe. We're continuing our discussion on Hullmetal Girls. If you haven't read this yet, we want to warn you again that this segment will contain spoilers.
- Danielle: [13:25](#) Spoilers!
- Amanda: [13:33](#) And people getting sucked out into the cold bleak vacuum of space.
- Danielle: [13:36](#) Vented. All right, well let's start there. So *laughter*
- Amanda: [13:42](#) So we're going to jump right into the most depressing part because that's how Danielle likes to roll, uh, with the venting of the Aeschylus. So we have the situation where our plucky heroes are sent to
- Danielle: [13:42](#) Our plucky inexperienced, undertrained heroes.
- Amanda: [13:57](#) They are sent to control this Fractionist protest - the Fractionists are the rebels - and yeah, they're told that it might be vented into space and then it is.
- Danielle: [14:13](#) And it's terrible, and I think that this is a really interesting part because like, obviously we get to know the Fractionists more and understand the true stakes of the story, and the Fractionists are the people who want to split the fleet, right? And let some of the fleet keep going and then they will just make do with whatever planet is quasi habitable. But they want to split humanity essentially, so that's kinda like the high stakes of the novel. And like, I liked that moment where the pod is sent in as a police unit. So I think that that's a really interesting

tension. Like usually we have protagonists are like, rebels and not the police trying to quell the rebels, and I thought that was really cool. And then everyone dies.

- Amanda: [15:00](#) Well, a lot of people. So that kind of leads us into the second ship venting. That happens much later. Uh, so they go through the story and Aisha kind of works with the fractionalists, kinda doesn't. They find a habitable planet, but it's a secret because the general body doesn't want to lose control of humanity, which would happen if they all went down to the planet. Like it's, it's a plot, you know, like you've heard it before and then we go and there is a false flag operation and our protagonists' little sister dies, who was the whole reason that she made the sacrifice in the first place.
- Danielle: [15:00](#) She gets Prim-ed.
- Amanda: [15:00](#) Yeah, it's a ...
- Danielle: [15:33](#) Like, I'm sorry to laugh, but you do have that, like, little sister and she like, watches her little sister and she's like, "Noooooo!". She gets Prim-ed.
- Amanda: [15:33](#) She does get Prim-ed.
- Danielle: [15:44](#) But ,you kind of glossed over it, but like Alpha 37 being habitable, that was a really high stakes mission.
- Amanda: [15:51](#) Yeah, but you knew it was going to happen. Like, as soon as they went to the planet you're like, "Oh, this is a habitable planet."
- Danielle: [15:55](#) Yeah. But it doesn't mean they can't be like, well written. Just because the ground has been tread before, it doesn't mean that it can't be like, a little danced upon.
- Amanda: [16:04](#) I mean I'm not, I'm not saying that it's not well written. I think that it is well written, I'm just saying that like when you know, beat for beat, like, the plots that are going to happen, it's harder to like ride along on the wave and I think that, like, the further we got into the story, like, the less the world building was a part of it, the less I was in it. You loved it the whole way through though. So like, clearly it's just a personal preference situation with this book.
- Danielle: [16:25](#) Yeah. And I mean we've even, like we share a lot of baggage in the sci-fi dystopian fantasy universe to begin with, so it's not even, like, your over it in a way that I am like a newbie ,because I'm not a newbie. Like you know, I've seen these things. Okay. So that was't an impressive to you. You are a tough cookie.
- Amanda: [16:46](#) I don't mean to be a tough cookie. I like so many things, and I liked so many things about this novel. I just think, like, the twists in this plot were not very twisty like, there was nothing surprising.
- Danielle: [17:02](#) Okay, okay. What about Key being the archangel? Like, the face of the rebellion before she got forced into transformative surgery to be a Scela.

- Amanda: [17:09](#) Was that surprising for you?
- Danielle: [17:10](#) I mean like, we knew that she had holes in her memory. We knew that she came from a background of privilege, so I figured it was something, but I didn't think that she was like, the head of the revolution.
- Amanda: [17:23](#) But she wasn't the head of the revolution.
- Danielle: [17:26](#) She, fine, she was the face of the revolution. It's on the head part! *laughter* It's right there. The face of the revolution.
- Amanda: [17:33](#) Yeah. So I mean, you know, like, that she's a fractionalist, so yeah, knowing that she is like the quote unquote "Archangel", I mean yeah, that added, like, a layer. Um, I think it would have been more interesting to see more hints of that earlier. Like whenever she went to the other ship, like, if there had been like, weird interactions that Key couldn't like,
- Danielle: [17:53](#) Oh, like people who recognized her.
- Amanda: [17:55](#) Yeah, because they're clearly would have been. So I thought that was kind of a missed opportunity for interesting narrative tension.
- Danielle: [18:02](#) I disagree because I feel that the way that they're describing people reacting to them because their Scela's, so they're like eight foot tall cyborgs, right? Like, first of all, how are people going to recognize the Archangel when she's now like 75 percent machine?
- Amanda: [18:20](#) Well, people have recognized the Archangel, like at the end, after she realizes that people recognize her.
- Danielle: [18:26](#) Okay. All right. Well, I tried. *laughter* I did want to bring up, to get back to the Prim-ing, so I used Aisha's little sister, Malika dies and like, Malika is the reason that Aisha got Scela-ed, the first place.
- Amanda: [18:26](#) Scela-ed, the verb version.
- Danielle: [18:47](#) I'm verbing things all over the place here, but, Malika dies, it's terrible, but one of my favorite parts of the book, I love this moment where Aisha has seen Malika die and she says, "You know what's messed up? If this had gone the other way, if I had saved her, I probably wouldn't care how many we let die. I would have been so relieved that the rest of it wouldn't have mattered. I feel like I care more about the rest of them because my sister's among them and I hate knowing that about myself". And I love how honest she is about this thing that disgusts her about herself, like, I love that moment of honesty.
- Amanda: [19:30](#) Yeah, I liked that too. What did you think of the relationship between Key and Aisha and kind of how it changed as Key realized that she was the Archangel and Aisha was working for the fractionlists and all of these things that changed their relationship?

- Danielle: [19:44](#) I don't know, I didn't care. I like, that definitely wasn't a draw for me. And I, I know that's terrible, but I guess I would have rather like, had, like, either 4 perspectives and had Woojin, and Praava been perspective character's like, Aisha and Key didn't like each other, okay we got that, like that's fine. Aisha was nervous that people were going to discover she's working with the fractionalist's. Okay that's fine. That definitely wasn't like, a driver in my love, or a driver in my enjoyment of the story. What about you?
- Amanda: [20:21](#) I feel like we lost quite a bit of Aisha after, um, after Key realized that she was the Archangel, so I think that a lot of things that could have been driving Aisha, like, you know, the death of her sister, her brother stuck on this plague ship, she, uh, she seemed just kind of take a backseat to Key, which I didn't love to see, but I guess it made sense with her character because her motivation stayed her sister the whole time and then once their sister was gone it was harder for her to find any sort of fire
- Danielle: [20:51](#) And we have more of her in the beginning, like in the, in the beginning it was unbalanced in the other direction.
- Amanda: [20:57](#) Yes, I agree.
- Danielle: [20:58](#) So I think that was okay, and kind of the last thing I wanted to talk about because I think that this is the part where our imaginations really get permission to like, go for it with this world is that Key is forced to become a Scela. They do this surgery against her will, and you mentioned Woojin kind of being coerced, and I think that that's really fascinating when you're talking about changing someone's entire being without their consent.
- Amanda: [21:31](#) Yeah. I think that's interesting trope, and we've seen that a lot with sci-fi. I think it's done really strongly in Scott Westerfield's Ugly series. Did you read that?
- Danielle: [21:31](#) Yes. So it is a trope ...
- Amanda: [21:48](#) I'm not saying it's bad, I think that the Ugliers trilogy is great, I think that this book was great and ..
- Danielle: [21:51](#) And we, we kind of mentioned this, but the, the risk element of the Scela surgery to begin with, like, there's this moment in the very beginning when Aisha is in the waiting room and she knows that there hasn't been any successful surgeries that day, but she's watched like, 20 people go in before her and so we get like, a real sense of the odds of survival.
- Amanda: [22:17](#) Yeah, the whole tension of that scene I thought it was still really well done, even knowing she's protagonist, she's going to be fine.
- Danielle: [22:17](#) Right.
- Amanda: [22:22](#) It was still, it was still a good scene

- Danielle: [22:24](#) And it was still like psychological warfare in a way, right? Like, she was understandably terrified. And then I don't think they thought Key would survive either.
- Amanda: [22:42](#) I disagree, I think they really wanted Key to survive. I think Key turning into a Scela was a clear message to the Fractionalists, like, even your most vocal supporter
- Danielle: [22:42](#) Can be brought low
- Amanda: [22:42](#) Can be brought to us.
- Danielle: [22:49](#) And that's our show for today, friends. 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!