



YA Cafe Podcast

24 Lovely, Dark, and Deep

02 August 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 *Lovely, Dark, and Deep* by Justina Chen, 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 an Intro to Shakespeare Escape Room and N-o-u-v-e-l-l-e E-L-A, 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: 00:39 and I'm Danielle Hall, an 8th and 9th grade English teacher and I blog@ Teachnouvelle.com. In Justina Chen's newest novel, *Viola Lee* has her life plan figured out she wants to become a journalist in the most dangerous parts of the world, the opposite of her risk averse parents, but when she suddenly developed the light sensitivity that leaves her unable to go outside or even sit under a bright light, all of her dreams start to seem impossible. Viola has to figure out a way to keep some control over her life as she struggles to navigate relationships with their parents, sister, and new potential boyfriend all while trying to avoid the blistering light that can be dangerous and even lethal. So Amanda, what did you think of *Lovely, Dark, and Deep*?

Amanda: 01:20 So this book had a pretty easy threshold of entry for me because of a very nostalgia filled reason, I used to be a little bit obsessed with Dean Koontz

Danielle: 01:29 just a little bit

Amanda: 01:30 *laughter* when I was in like middle and high school, so I read like everything Dean Koontz has ever written. Uh, but one of my favorite series was about a main character with light sensitivity. So it was called, uh the second book in the series was called *Seize the Night*, it was *Fear Nothing*. Um, so I was like fascinated by this disorder at the time. And so now having this book that like goes into it in a real world setting with someone who's like, just discovering their disorder, I was super 100 percent onboard for. Also, I cannot attest to the quality of these books, I read them when I was like, 13, 14

Danielle: 01:30 She's talking about Dean Koontz, y'all

Amanda: 02:12 Yeah, not, not Lovely, Dark, and Deep. I thought Lovely, Dark, and Deep was wonderful. I just adored it. I loved the different characters and like all of their different paths of navigating and, there's so many different things I'm excited to talk about with this book, so I'm just going to cut my gushing short here, I loved it, I thought it was great. What did you think Danielle?

Danielle: 02:35 Well, I had a different threshold of entry, which was of course Firefly, and I definitely want to talk more about Firefly in the spoiler section, but throughout this whole book we kind of like, it became very clear that Viola has a relationship with the Scifi series Firefly which only had one season, may it rest in peace and a movie, and now there's like a cult following around this show and it kind of functions as an analogy to many parts of this story and I definitely want to come back to it in spoilers, but like the opening scene happens at a Firefly convention and like, that was enough for me.

Amanda: 03:15 So Viola is at this Firefly convention because a huge part of her life has been bake sales and doing these bake sales for various causes.

Danielle: 03:26 Right. And she sees that as like, her journalistic practice, right? She creates these like, pamphlets that are informational and like, this is her go getter-ness into the world is bake sales.

Amanda: 03:38 Yeah. Which I really liked because at first it's like, "okay, we're at a bake sale. That's a setting", but then like, "no, this is a really big part of this character." Like, she loves cooking, she likes the way it connects her to other people. Um, she cooks for her family all of the time and seeing that constantly throughout the novel, not just, "Oh, this is a good setting for the first scene."

Danielle: 03:59 Right. It's not like chocolate chip cookies every time either. She liked crafts, baked goods that are like, I dunno, crafted to the thing, I don't know,

Amanda: 04:07 like way too many puns,

Danielle: 04:09 too many puns! *laughter* I approve. I also really like that very early on in the novel, we are introduced to her parents who are crisis managers, so they have an organization that does crisis management on an international level. And so early in the book we have these interstitials that are like blurbs from their company handbook and of course it, you know, maps onto Viola's pending trauma.

Amanda: 04:39 I really liked that too, and I think that you saw, especially early in the book, Viola's resistance to being a case that is managed. Like, she felt this tension between her

parents because once they were investigating this disorder, like, they were in full research crisis mode, 'How can we mitigate this?'

Danielle: 04:58 So here's an example, "The worst case scenario; The best offense for any kind of crisis is advanced preparation. Where are your vulnerabilities? What is the very worst thing that can happen? Lee & Lee Communications: Inside the War Room, the Crisis Management Playbook." So these interstitials really provide us, like, the jumping off point for how aggressively involved her parents are going to get very early on. And I mean, like, they are ready to just take the bull by the horns and do everything that's going to protect her. And there's no like, path of least interference that they're going to try first. They're going to just go full on, doesn't matter what she has to wear or how she has to manage her time. And obviously (like you said), she resists that.

Amanda: 05:49 Yeah. I mean who wants to be handled? You know.

Danielle: 05:51 Unless you're at Disney world, in which case that's okay. *laughter* Tell me which line to get in, I'll do it. Another thing we learned very early on, um, she sees Josh, (you know the would-be boyfriend) at the Firefly convention and she decides he looks like Thor and when she collapses she collapses into his arms, and one of the things that he's kind of pushing there is that he has these comic books called Persephone From Planet X, and Persephone also has the photo sensitive disorder.

Amanda: 06:26 And this is before we discover our protagonist does, to be clear, so it's just, it's just one of those great little book coincidences that you just roll with.

Danielle: 06:34 Yeah, it works really well. I love that Josh is a comic book artist and Persephone becomes really important to their relationship and we can definitely dive more into that in the spoiler section. 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 Lovely, Dark, and Deep and dig a little deeper.

Ad: 07:13 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 pre-orders count towards the author's first week totals. Everybody wins! Next week we're going to discuss Forest Queen by Betsy Cornwell. If you'd like to help us keep bringing you great content, pre-order through the link in our show notes. Happy reading!

Amanda: 07:13 Welcome back, y'all, it's time for Things We Like A Latte. Danielle, what's your brew of choice this week?

Danielle: 07:50 Well Amanda, we went to this escape room here in Pensacola and we actually went with our producer friend/awesome person, Leila and her fiance Phill, and the escape

room that we went to was not a traditional escape room, it was like blended with trivia. And, we also love pub trivia and Phill hosts it at our local pub here and so we have a weekly trivia team, and the four of us were able to totally dominate this escape room. We not only were the fastest team ever to pass the threshold for winning, we set the rooms high score. Go find yourselves other escape rooms that have this escape room/trivia blend. It's really great, strongly recommend it. How about you Amanda? What do you Like A Latte?

Amanda: 08:45 So what I Like A Latte is a video game, and there is a certain repackaging to directly activate your nostalgia for old games that video game companies do. And I am just here for it. One hundred percent. I will re-buy a game in the new platform and I am part of the problem with the gaming industry, and I recognize that. So I am currently playing the very beautiful game Okami. It was originally released as a Playstation 2 game and it's now been rereleased on Playstation 4 in HD, I think it's also coming out on Switch and it's just a beautiful game with a really interesting gameplay mechanics that I haven't seen elsewhere. Uh, it's kind of Zelda-esque in terms of it being an adventure game where you go, not like breath of the wild Zelda, more like more traditional Zelda, so like, your Ocarina's, your things like that. So if you are hurting for a good old style adventure game, I really like this one and think that it is worth your time, Okami.

Danielle: 09:44 We're going to take a break and when we come back we'll return to our discussion on Lovely, Dark, and Deep. 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!

Amanda: 10:18 Welcome back, y'all, to the YA Cafe. We're continuing our discussion on Lovely, Dark, and Deep by Justina Chen. If you haven't read this yet, we want to warn you again that this segment will contain spoilers.

Danielle: 10:18 Spoilers! Uh, well, let's get back to Firefly.

Amanda: 10:18 Oh, of course.

Danielle: 11:09 Y'all, I loved this so much and it's not even completely pandering to Firefly fans, like, I think that even if you haven't seen Firefly, which you totally should, you should go watch that now, but even if you haven't seen it, like, you'll still get a lot out of it, but if you have seen it you'll get even more. So at the beginning of the book, they're at the Firefly convention and Viola is with her little sister Roz who refuses to wear a dress and they have two costumes. They have the River Tam costume, and a costume for Zoe who is Mal's second in command, blah blah blah, y'all. I really love this show. Anyway, Zoe is kind of this like ostensibly bad ass character, and River is like, wearing a dress, right? And so it's like, "Aww, River." And in the show River has some mental health issues and PTSD, because she was tortured. And Viola really like, rails against being compared to River throughout the book. Like, she keeps insisting, "No, I am Zoe." But, like, throughout the book you

realize that River is strong, River has been trained to be a weapon, and River overcomes her challenges and really Viola's like River. And I love it.

Amanda: 11:56 That is a great observation.

Danielle: 12:00 Thank you. And, sorry, just one more thing about River. *laughter* It's really important, Justina Chen did not do this on accident. You know, River's brother saves her from the torture and she has this really vulnerable moment where she says like, "You saved me. You gave up everything and you found me broken" and like, of course, but Simon rescued you because he loves you because he's your brother. Like, I love that.

Amanda: 12:28 So that's a very different sibling relationship than the one we have in this book. *laughter*

Danielle: 12:33 Right. You wanted to talk about what a brat Roz was.

Amanda: 12:35 Oh, Roz is such a brat. I mean it's not entirely Roz's fault. So, a tension throughout the book is that Viola is sort of Roz's chauffeur for her to wake up at 5:00 in the morning to get to crew practice or whatever, basically whatever it is that Roz needs, like, Viola is responsible for. And that goes throughout the novel, but I really love that at the end she finally calls Roz out on it and then they, they actually wind up having a moment of connection there towards the end. And I thought it was really great.

Danielle: 13:06 Yeah, I did too. And I thought that Roz was really, really important to the feel of the overall novel because you talked about how Viola really resists her parents management, right? And at some points she's kind of a brat, but we see that Roz is like, actually a brat, right? And Viola is just reacting the best that she can to her new life with photosensitivity. And so I think it's a really important, like, contrast between the two that like, okay, there's some moments where Viola isn't ready to listen to her parents and doesn't care and doesn't want to do those things and like, wants to, you know, forge her own way. And it comes across as like, "Wow, why can't she just do the sensible thing?" But since we do have Roz to balance that and Roz like, is ridiculous, like, I think it's really crucial to show Viola as being mature.

Amanda: 14:06 I don't think that Viola was like, a brat for resisting a lot of her parents precautions. She still did a lot of them, like I don't think she did many things that were dumb. Like she, she went out for a run but she kept herself fully covered and went out at night so clearly she was safe. She went to see a meteor shower, typically a thing that occurs at night, so the only reason that it wound up being more of a situation was because of like a freak snow storm. So I don't think it's like Viola was irresponsible with her knowledge of her condition.

Danielle: 14:42 No, it wasn't like that, it was like, when they gave her the hat, she kind of pouted about it, like, just put on the hat, I don't know. Anyway, we can disagree. It's fine. *laughter* We don't have to agree on everything. But I did want to share my moment of ignorance with this novel, you know, 'know better, do better.' So I realized because I am an ignorant able bodied person, that I was waiting for the resolution to be a cure for her photosensitivity

Amanda: 14:42 Really?

Danielle: 15:17 And I didn't even know that I was waiting for this resolution, until the resolution wasn't a cure. And I realized that the whole point is that you can have a chronic disorder and still have a full life. Like, that's the takeaway from this novel. You have to reshape your life and you have to have, you know, new and different dreams sometimes. You know, like Viola can't be a journalist in the UAE, but she can do other things, and like, that's the point, right? Like, the resolution isn't always to be cured of the thing, but to live the truth of your condition and like, do the best you can.

Amanda: 15:59 I wasn't, I was not expecting her to get better because I knew that photosensitivity was a thing, I think more than you did

Danielle: 15:59 Because you read the Dean Koontz book

Amanda: 15:59 Because I read the Dean Koontz book and it made me a better person. No, *laughter* but I think that that's interesting, especially if you compare this to a book like "Everything, Everything." Which uh, frustrates me

Danielle: 15:59 Which it's been compared to.

Amanda: 15:59 Oh, it shouldn't be, it's ...

Danielle: 15:59 Totally different

Amanda: 15:59 Because that was part of what frustrated me about Everything, Everything is that, so spoilers for Everything, Everything coming up, if you haven't read it yet and want to uh, the protagonist winds up not having this disorder. And I always felt like that was kind of

Danielle: 15:59 cheating.

Amanda: 17:02 Yeah. I felt like it was cheating because if she did have this disorder, like, she really would have to make these huge sacrifices and changes in her life. But she didn't, so she just got her happily ever after, with this weird relationship with her mother now. So I don't think it's fair to compare this book to Everything, Everything because I feel like this book did not cheat, like, it

looked at the hard questions, like, you had a main character who wanted a world of sunshine, like, loved being out and wanted to go to the desert. It's not possible with this disorder that she has,

Danielle: 17:02 But

Amanda: 17:02 But other things are possible

Danielle: 17:02 Other things are possible and like, I can't even read you this list, but she makes a list at the end, a new bucket list of all the things that are possible for her.

Amanda: 17:02 Yeah, that was really beautiful.

Danielle: 17:02 It was so beautiful.

Amanda: 17:02 One of the reasons that her dreams have to be reshaped is not because of her disorder, but because she's not as competitive as she thinks she is for a journalism degree, and I really liked that.

Danielle: 17:02 Yeah, and I really liked this character of her Aunt who like, first of all is the one that took her on the trip abroad to see if she would like being in the desert to see if she could be this kind of journalist, but her Aunt is the one that says, you know, 'maybe there's another way for you to blend your love of human connection and like, getting people the real story, and your love of food and this thing you've been doing with bake sales.'

Amanda: 18:04 Yeah. I really liked that too. Especially because I feel like Auntie Ruth, uh, she folded like a cheap suit there at the beginning. I was like, "Come on Auntie Ruth. This is not, this is not how I was imagining your character reacting."

Danielle: 18:17 She sided with the parents very quickly. But she's the one that says the magic word in this book, the one that leads us to the resolution, which is 'gastro-diplomacy.'

Amanda: 18:29 Yeah, I thought that was great.

Danielle: 18:29 So, gastro-diplomacy, because I learned it from this book. ...

Amanda: 18:29 Did you look it up? Is it real?

Danielle: 18:29 I mean, I'm sure it's real. Justina Chen did her research!

Amanda: 18:29 Justina Chen doesn't make mistakes.

Danielle: 18:29 She just not. Um, gastro-diplomacy would be like trying to intervene in a peaceful, non-talking way through food, right? So if you're going to have a meeting with another country and you are going to bring them, for example, to the White House, maybe you prep your staff by feeding them food from that country, or vice versa if you're going to go to another country, like, maybe you share some American food before you have your meeting and then this way you have the common ground of food to bring you together.

Amanda: 19:22 It was great.

Danielle: 19:23 It was so great, I loved it. It was, it was such a creative third option, like, I can't even handle it. So my biggest complaint with Viola is that she kept believing and waiting for the worst in Josh. Like, she just kept doubting his character and his fidelity and like, did I miss where she found out that he was a player? Because she kept calling him a player.

Amanda: 19:49 So she is getting her information from Aminita who knows this character of Josh from before his brother died, who was like, get out, get drunk and partier/player, all that stuff. So Aminita is the one who warned her away from Josh.

Danielle: 19:49 That's right.

Amanda: 20:08 But the real point of Josh in the book is - because the whole book is a balance of protecting yourself and being vulnerable - so on all the sides of this, you have her parents who want her to protect herself 100%, but with her being fully protected, she never goes outside, she never contacts anyone, these sorts of things that cut her off completely. There's even the list there towards the end that's like different types of people, the way that they cut themselves off. She could have put herself in a dark box forever and called it in the name of safety, which was sort of what her parents wanted her to do, but that's not how you live in the world. You can live in the world and not get hurt by anybody, not get burned by the light, but you're stuck in a box. And so this whole book was about her figuring out how to be safe and protect herself, but still allow herself to be somewhat vulnerable in the world. Boom. *laughter* So I think it's safe to say you may have been able to tell, we definitely recommend this book.

Danielle: 21:13 Loved it.

Danielle: 21:15 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!