



YA Cafe Podcast
Episode 25: The Forest Queen
9 August 2018

Amanda: 00:00 Folks, we just want to give you a heads up. This episode does touch on subjects of rape, suicide and abuse, so if you don't want to hear those things, please turn away from this episode.

Danielle: 00:10 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 the Forest Queen by Betsy Cornwell. Grab a mug of your favorite beverage, friends, and let's talk books.

Ad: 00:27 Do you have a product you'd like to get in front of teachers, librarians, and other book lovers? If so, email us yacafepodcast@gmail.com

Amanda: 00:36 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: 00:44 and I'm Danielle Hal, an 8th and 9th Grade English teacher and I blog Teachnouvelle.com. We are joined today by our fabulous friend, Claire. Claire joined me on episode 12 to talk about Siobhan Vivian's Stay Sweet and we're super happy to have her back. Hi Claire!

Claire: 01:00 Hi! Thank you for having me!

Danielle: 01:01 Thank you for coming back. So before we talk about today's book, I did want to close the loop on something we wondered in our Stay Sweet episode. So Claire, you had mentioned reading this book in line for ice cream.

Claire: 01:14 Yes, at Salt and Straw

Danielle: 01:17 Which is a fancy, delicious ice cream place on the West coast. So we were simultaneously wondering, like, what the inspiration for the secret flavor 'Home Sweet Home' in Stay Sweet was, so we reached out to Siobhan Vivian and we said like, "Hey, where can we get something that tastes like 'Home Sweet Home?'" And she actually said, in the best of coincidences, that the closest she had found, the thing that she, like, used as her inspiration was from Salt and Straw.

Claire: 01:45 That is so awesome. I feel like it's the cherry on top of the ice cream sundae that was reading that book.

Danielle: 01:53 *laughter* That's amazing.

Amanda: 01:54 So Claire is a great friend and also is an aspiring television writer, so she knows all the best things. So Claire, what's like, a TV show that we need to watch.

Claire: 02:05 Okay. A TV show I've really been enjoying (and this is super niche) is called Siren. It is on Freeform. It recently finished its first season and it's been renewed for another season and it is a mermaid thriller.

Danielle: 02:20 Ah!

Amanda: 02:20 Love it.

Claire: 02:20 It's great, it's really great.

Amanda: 02:24 Is that like, about evil mermaids, or are the main characters mermaids?

Danielle: 02:28 Are they mermaids in danger?

Amanda: 02:30 Are they mermaids who are murderers?

Claire: 02:32 It's sort of set up, you think it's going to be Twilight-esque, it's set in the Pacific Northwest and it's about a guy who just happens upon a mermaid, but it's so much more and it really turns all these tropes that you expect on its head.

Danielle: 02:44 Okay, so we will have to check out Siren. Today's book is the Forest Queen by Betsy Cornwell. In the Forest Queen, sixteen year old Sylvie has been

born into a life of nobility and privilege. She has spent her entire life hating and fearing her cruel John and hiding from his wrath with her closest friend, a commoner nicknamed Bird. When Sylvian bird come across, another person turned away from her own home, Little Jane they make a plan to escape into the forest. With Little Jane and midwife Mae Tuck, they build a community in the forest and in harmony with nature. Sylvie only wanted to save herself, but as their community grows she has to choose whether to continue to live in secret, apart from the kingdom, or to stand up to her family and everything the nobility stands for. All right, so Amanda, I want to start with you because before we started recording you said that you didn't think that this was quite the Robin Hood retelling that it was like, marketed to be.

Amanda: 03:42 You are, you are very much just painting me as like the biggest hater in the whole world. No! I just thinks that the word retelling like, doesn't really encapsulate what this novel is.

Danielle: 03:50 Right, I do prefer the term 're-imagining', but publicity in books still uses the word 'retelling', but I prefer the term 're-imagining'. Does that do you better?

Amanda: 04:01 It does me a little better, yeah, because I mean I think that a lot of this book is clearly inspired by the Robin Hood legend, but a lot of it also isn't and I think that there's a lot of creativity and imagination that Betsy Cornwell has put into this book that's not just like 'let's retell Robin Hood, but this time it's a lady' like, I don't think that's very fair to the book.

Danielle: 04:19 Aah.

Claire: 04:19 Right. I think retellings set certain expectations that this maybe doesn't fulfill? I don't think it's necessarily a drawback. I agree with you that there's a lot of cool and creative things that are put in this book that you wouldn't expect from just a straight retelling.

Amanda: 04:34 Exactly.

Danielle: 04:35 Why not though? Because I really love Robin Hood and I would take a retelling of Robin Hood everyday, all day. So like, what are you seeing in the original story that you, you're like, "Well that sucks. I'm glad she did it differently."

Amanda: 04:47 Well, I mean there's a big part of it that obviously will have to go into the spoiler section.

Danielle: 04:51 Stay tuned.

Amanda: 04:52 Stay tuned for spoilers! But I mean, I think that in general, like, Robin Hood wasn't a noble, right? Like I am not super familiar with the Robin Hood story.

Danielle: 05:01 Aha!

Amanda: 05:01 To be fair I mostly, you know, I had a crush on the fox, like everybody and that's pretty much the extent of my Robin Hood knowledge, so.

Danielle: 05:08 Okay so I love the Robin Hood mythology and there is like, a certain time period in the mythology where he was a noble kind of fallen out of nobility, either like a lord down on his luck or like a lord reformed.

Amanda: 05:25 What about you Claire? Did you have a lot of like, Robin Hood baggage coming into this?

Claire: 05:29 I think I have a lot of vague ideas from a lot of different versions. I don't know, I think that I actually read this more just as an original work that happens to have some little Easter eggs.

Amanda: 05:43 I think that is a great way to put it.

Danielle: 05:44 Easter eggs are a really great way to put it. I think that the spirit of Betsy Cornwell's books, um, (she also wrote *Mechanica* and *Ventures* which are Cinderella re-imaginings as well as *Tides* is a book about selkies) the feel and flavor is very similar in my opinion, to Gail Carson Levine who wrote *Ella Enchanted* and *The Princesses Bamarre*, like, kind of these happy fairytale things with kind of a dark side-current.

Claire: 06:16 Yeah. Where she gives this sort of classic but underdeveloped female character an inner life, and more excitement, and more agency. I mean that's what I really love about Gail Carson Levine's *Ella Enchanted*, it's probably one of my favorite books. It really spruces up the Cinderella tale in a way that I just truly love.

Amanda: 06:34 Yeah. I think that this one has a lot of darkness to it though - *The Forest Queen*, not *Ella Enchanted* - but with this book, like, it opens very darkly. Like, she's living with an abusive brother, they meet Little Jane when she's trying to commit suicide. There's a lot there early. What did you guys think about *Bird*? Like, the character

of Bird. Early in the book we meet him, he seems to be like the forest sprite/love interest type. What did y'all think of him? I didn't think much of him at all, so I was wondering.
laughter

Claire: 07:05 I like a little romance so I'm glad that it was set up early, you know page two or something, and I liked that early on they established that he's a cook. He sort of focuses on culinary skills and typically women in this society are more of the hunters, that was a nice little detail.

Amanda: 07:23 Yeah, I liked that too.

Danielle: 07:25 I thought he was fine. Like, I think that Betsy Cornwell really likes writing about friendship that grows into love and I thought that that was well done here, like friendship first and she did a great job at that. I will say, I think that for me, part of the reason that birds character fell flat, like once we had the vehicle of escaping into the woods was just because there were so many great female characters and friendships like Little Jane and Mae Tuck were just wonderful parts of the book. So I think that like in comparison Bird was just kind of this guy.

Claire: 07:58 He dropped off a little.

Amanda: 07:59 Yeah. Which is fine, I was not as interested in him as Little Jane or Mae Tuck. I also was kind of expecting him to be Robin Hood because his nickname was Bird. Did anybody else that?

Claire: 08:12 *laughter* No, wow. I never thought of that.

Amanda: 08:14 I was like, "Oh, I thought this was a gender-bend Robin Hood, but he seems to be a dude and his name is Bird, so"

Claire: 08:20 That sounds like a red herring that she threw in there.

Amanda: 08:22 *gasp* I got red herring-ed!

Amanda: 08:24 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 the Forest Queen and dig a little deeper.

New Speaker: 08:33 Music break

Danielle: 08:49 Hello listener. Are you sitting there thinking, "This podcast is awesome!?" I know, us too. And we want this podcast to keep going forever, so getting really honest, here's one way that you can make that happen. If you want to support us and the authors of the books that we read, please consider pre-ordering through our Amazon affiliate links. We get a small kickback and your order goes towards the author's first week totals, which look really great. Next week, our book will be the Fresh Ink anthology edited by Lamar Giles. This is a collection of short stories from some fabulous authors you've definitely heard of and we have special guests, Lamar Giles,

Amanda: 09:32 Ooooh!

Danielle: 09:32 I know! So pre-order the book and come check out the episode. Happy reading!

New Speaker: 09:37 Music break

Amanda: 09:44 Welcome back, y'all! It's time for Things We Like A Latte. Danielle, what's your brew of choice this week?

Danielle: 09:49 Well, Amanda, this week I am reading more fairy tale stuff, which is *Star-Touched Stories* by Roshani Chokshi. She wrote *Star-Touched Queen* and *A Crown of Wishes* and *Star-Touched Stories* are just a collection of stories in the same universe. I really love her development of the world, particularly like, the other world with gods and goddesses and different creatures from Hindu mythology and truly, truly a beautiful book in a series of beautiful books. So that *Star-Touched Stories* by Roshani Chokshi. Claire, how about you?

Claire: 10:26 So I recently finished reading a book called *Under the Banner of Heaven* by Jon Krakauer. It came out awhile ago, I think early 2000s and it's kind of a true crime story of a murder. So it's somewhat serious subject matter, but it's really a really fascinating look at Mormon fundamentalism.

Amanda: 10:48 Is it fiction or is it nonfiction?

Claire: 10:49 It's nonfiction. It's based on a murder carried out by these two brothers who were part of this sort of self proclaimed sect and it delves into kind of the mindset that led them to this crime and it's just really, it was hard to put down. It was just really, really interesting.

Danielle: 11:07 That sounds really cool. And how about you Amanda? What's your Thing You Like A Latte?

Amanda: 11:12 So if you like stand-up comedy, it's a really good time to have Netflix. So one of my favorite stand-up specials that I've watched (and I've been watching a lot of them), is Hassan Minaj's Homecoming King. He starts out the stand-up and he's got like a projector screen behind him. That is helpful because it really, like, sets it apart visually from all of the other stand-up specials, but it also kind of seems like a gimmick to start with. But throughout the show he uses it so effectively and he bounces between humor and seriousness. He talks about his experiences with racism, and having immigrant parents, and all of these things in this very real and raw way, but then still balances it with a lot of really fabulous humor. Um, and just the end of it, the whole show is great and the end of it is just like a one-two punch in the gut with like a little bit of spoonfull of sugar at the end, and it is just great. I can't recommend it enough. It is Homecoming King by Hassan Minaj.

Danielle: 12:07 We're going to take a break and when we come back we'll return to our discussion on The Forest Queen. 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!

New Speaker: 12:20 Music break

Amanda: 12:38 Welcome back, y'all to the YA Cafe. We're continuing our discussion on The Forest Queen by Betsy Cornwell. If you haven't read this yet, we want to warn you again that this segment will contain spoilers.

Danielle: 12:47 Spoilers!

Claire: 12:49 So picking up from the non-spoiler section, I thought Bird was not as developed as I might've wanted. I thought he kind of had a promising start for me, you know, he has this commoner background, but he's, he's befriended a noble woman and there's a lot of inherent conflict there and they have a little of that at the beginning, but they really stopped interacting through a lot of the book.

Danielle: 13:15 So Birds presence in the novel sort of functioned in the same way as in The Children of Blood and Bone, we have Amari's servant Binta. So Omari grew up thinking Binta was like her very best friend, but Binta was also a servant, right? And so we were thrown into this question of that, like, power dynamic and can you really be best friends with somebody who's like, paid to hang out with you? But I think that this

book, whereas it's not quite as political as that, it does very clearly talk about privilege. And Sylvie has to confront her privilege in the forest, and this is like a really sharp departure from the classic tale because like, we don't shine a light on the fact that Robin used to be nobility, right? You know, even in the fox version where he clearly was, because he knew Maid Marion, but here, you know, Sylvie says, "Every time I thought I'd seen all the facets of my own selfishness, something new confronted me." and so she just gets it like over and over again that she had this position of privilege. Like, the part where they were talking about the water.

Claire: 14:25 Yep. And how the village occasionally has no clean water and they all have to drink beer.

Danielle: 14:29 Yes. But Sylvie still gets to live in a castle with like, topiaries

Amanda: 14:33 And man-made waterfall.

Danielle: 14:35 Yeah. And Bird says to her, "You want to believe you're not complicit in this." And that's like, perfect because you know, if you're Sylvie you're like, "Yeah, well I have privilege but I have left it all to live in the forest." But like, she's still benefits from her privilege. Like, John tries to tell everybody that Alana Dale was the Forest Queen so that Sylvie could come back home and be his wife or whatever, and that's privileged that she had. She wasn't, like, threatened by her escapades.

Claire: 15:08 Yeah. And I actually thought that is woven in pretty well. It's occasionally really in your face, but I almost didn't mind because that was sort of the point.

Danielle: 15:18 Yeah.

Claire: 15:18 And it was interesting, too, that it came up over and over again in different circumstances. Like it's not just that she has the privilege of nice things is that she has the privilege of never having tasted beer, you know, always had clean water and she has the privilege of having winter just be a fun sport to enjoy outside and then leave instead of having to endure it. I mean it, it was neat how the different facets of their life brought out her privilege.

Amanda: 15:45 Alright, so as we mentioned the beginning, her brother John is awful and becomes the Sheriff of the town of Loughsley. So, what did we think of his character?

Danielle: 15:55 I really liked the just creepiness of his character from the beginning. Betsy Cornwell did not spin us on this one. He was creepy from the jump.

Amanda: 16:04 Yep.

Danielle: 16:05 He was mean from the jump, and he was self-serving from the jump. One of the things that we learned early on, like Sylvia is trying to think like, "Oh, do I have any happy memories with him?" And what she comes up with is that they used to pick blackberries together and he would always give her blackberries to eat, and she has this moment with Bird where Bird's like, "Oh wait" and Bird takes the blackberry and pulls out this like, little translucent worm. And he says, "Yeah, these little worms, they're harmless, but they're in like one out of five blackberries" and Sylvie has this moment of recognition that every blackberry John had given her, had a worm in it. And I just thought it was such a great metaphor for their relationship.

Claire: 16:52 Betsy Cornwell set up how awful John was and the feeling of unease that she set up at the very beginning never goes away. I felt like the tone of the book kind of lived in these two places, either really dark or almost too upbeat. She sets up John as potentially, uh, molesting his sister. Um, you can't really tell if it's already happened or if she just fears for it until the end where she reveals that no, it hasn't happened, but Sylvie has lived in fear of this, but that shadow hangs over the entire book. Jane's attempted suicide is there, right at the front like you talked about, but then they get to the forest and life is just kinda good and easy and fun, and it kind of threw me to have such a dark world juxtaposed with this almost too easy life in the forest. And I kind of felt like if you're going to start with that much ominous stuff, it felt like it was missing in the middle. The building of tension and threat kind of disappeared for a while, for me.

Danielle: 17:53 Hmm.

Amanda: 17:53 I think that's fair, but I also think it's super intentional. Like, I feel that the joy of the town and the community they built in the forest was like set up to directly oppose all the oppression that they had faced in the village, as nobility and as commoners to show that yes, this stratification is worse for commoners, but it's really bad for everybody and no one's able to really live peacefully or happily in this way. So I felt that that was intentional. I didn't feel it reading, but like since you say that, looking back on and I'm like, "Oh wow, they really were like, different books.

Danielle: 18:27 Before we leave talking about John's character, I definitely want to talk about this aspect where he pulled a capital "N", capital "G", "Nice Guy"

moment where he's like, "But Sylvie, I only watched you sleep. I didn't rape you or anything. So clearly we should be together now. It was awful.

Amanda: 18:52 I just feel you're not giving John enough credit here.

Danielle: 18:56 UGH

Claire: 18:56 *laughter*

Danielle: 18:56 Listeners! She is not being ...

Amanda: 18:59 No no no

Danielle: 18:59 She's being ironic.

Amanda: 19:01 Yeah.

Danielle: 19:01 Ugh, but that's such a classic like, Nice Guy move, right? Like, "I've been here, like helping you with your car, and helping you move, and help blah blah blah. Now, you know, you owe me sex."

Amanda: 19:14 You know, I see this a lot, you mentioned the Nice Guy thing. I think it's something you see a lot in TV. Like, a girl gets super drunk and the guy like, takes her home and puts her to bed

Danielle: 19:21 And doesn't rape her.

Amanda: 19:23 And doesn't rape her. Wow, what a stand up guy.

Danielle: 19:26 So speaking of rape

Amanda: 19:28 On that happy note

Danielle: 19:30 Little Jane is pregnant. She is pregnant from rape by our resident Nice Guy, John.

Amanda: 19:36 Which, when she revealed that I kinda thought we already knew.

Danielle: 19:39 I already knew.

Amanda: 19:40 Yeah. I mean like, clearly we, the reader already knew. But I also thought that Sylvie already knew because Little Jane said like, "Yeah, nobody could overpower me." And so I felt like

Danielle: 19:49 It had to be like power power, not physical power.

Amanda: 19:52 Yeah. So I dunno, I was just surprised when she was like, "I thought I was never going to tell you." And I was like, "I thought, I thought we covered this."

Danielle: 19:59 So one of the things that I really liked about Little Jane's presence in the book, um, you know, I follow Betsy Cornwall on Instagram and I've known about her for a long time and she was pregnant when she was writing this book and it totally shows. Like, it totally shows that she was pregnant while writing and then a new mother, while editing and things like that because there's so much tenderness here for the experience of being pregnant. Mae Tuck is a midwife and she's brought in to kind of help Little Jane through her problems of like, malnutrition and a bunch of other things. And like, then I feel like there's a really good portrayal of how exhausting motherhood is. Like, even after Little Jane has some help, there's like some love for new mothers in this book.

Claire: 20:49 Yeah. When I got to the birth scene, I was like, "This is from real life. This person who wrote this has had this experience." It felt really real.

Danielle: 20:59 Yeah. Especially when Mae Tuck said like, "When they say they can't, that's when you know the baby's coming."

Claire: 21:06 I almost felt like Little Jane could have been the main character.

Danielle: 21:10 Oooooooh.

Amanda: 21:10 Yeah, that would've been cool.

Danielle: 21:13 Or Alana Dale, but we'll circle back to that too.

Claire: 21:16 Yeah, sure.

Amanda: 21:17 Two and a half pages and Danielle got a crush on Alana Dale.

Danielle: 21:20 I think she's crush-worthy.

Claire: 21:23 *laughter* Oh yeah. And also Alana Dale was my favorite of the Easter egg names

Danielle: 21:27 Yes!

Claire: 21:27 Like, it's so close to Alan and I don't know.

Danielle: 21:29 Yeah, I was definitely waiting for a queer romance in this book, but you know,

Amanda: 21:34 There was one the uh, Alana Dale and the Princess

Danielle: 21:39 Yeah, but that was so fleeting.

Claire: 21:41 So fleeting,

Amanda: 21:41 It was fleeting but, like, there also weren't any straight romances either.

Danielle: 21:44 That is true.

Amanda: 21:45 I mean, except for the one that, you know, Bird and Sylvia.

Danielle: 21:49 Oh yeah. THE romance *laughter*

Amanda: 21:51 Bird and Sylvie.

Danielle: 21:53 Sorry Betsy. We just glossed right over that one.

Amanda: 21:55 But I like a book where I can ignore the romance and still have a great book.

Danielle: 21:59 Me too. I like the friendship forward books.

Amanda: 22:03 Yeah.

Danielle: 22:03 What's the mouth feel of the book? Well, it's really friendship-y.

Amanda: 22:09 This is what happens when you watched too many cooking shows and then go and try to talk about books.

Danielle: 22:14 So Amanda, you wanted to talk about Mae Tuck?

Amanda: 22:17 Yeah, I just thought that Mae Tuck was a great character. I loved her perspective of just this compassionate person who has dedicated her life to helping other people and she brings her little like, old pagan aesthetic to this young community in the forest. And I thought it was great.

Danielle: 22:34 Me too. I really liked her and that kind of segways into talking about the ending. So we kind of mentioned that this book wraps up neatly, but there is this moment when Sylvie is in the oubliette and John tells her that he killed everyone else. And I'm sure that it's like, Game of Thrones and Handmaid's Tale, like, conditioning me for that to be true, right? But I was like, "Holy cow, I've read *Mechanica* and I've read *Tides* and this would be way out of character for Betsy Cornwell to write. But I kind of like, wanted some violence, like, some actual like, death, but there didn't end up being characters we connected with who died.

Claire: 23:20 Yeah, I felt the same. I did suspect a little bit that they weren't really dead, but I almost was like, 'you know, if they are, I'm here for it' because

Danielle: 23:29 Me too.

Claire: 23:29 That would be a really dark twist that would actually fit with the tone of the book I started reading.

Amanda: 23:35 Right. And I think, I mean just the way everything went at the end with like 'we freed everyone from jail and then we created a democracy and voted to put your brother in prison.' I like, it was, it was too much and it was like the whole book was this one book up until the last 10 pages and then it turned into 'we planned this elaborate jail heist.'

Danielle: 23:58 Right.

Amanda: 23:58 Freeing the entire castle and like, it can't even be a middle grade book, right? Like it's, it's not an *Ella Enchanted* sort of thing because there's still like, rape and potential molestation and like,

Claire: 24:13 Yeah, there's so much rape in this book

Amanda: 24:15 Lotta rape in this book.

Claire: 24:17 It really did feel like Sylvie and Birds relationship could have been from a middle grade book,

Danielle: 24:22 Yes

Claire: 24:22 But then everything else in the book was not at all

Amanda: 24:24 Except for the part at the end when they're like, stuck in a hole in the ground with corpses that they tried to build a ladder out of.

Danielle: 24:31 Oh my goodness. It was dark. It was dark, but I would have been very happy if a character that I loved - just one - had died in the storming of the forest. Right? And I was just going to say that I thought that Mae Tuck would've been the perfect character.

Amanda: 24:51 Yeah, I think that would have been good. Another thing that I thought would've been good would've been kind of like a Bolivian army ending. Okay, so Bolivian army ending is where like, a piece of fiction ends with the main characters like, charging into fight

Danielle: 25:05 Like, without actually finishing the fight?

Amanda: 25:08 Right. Like the end of Angel or the end of the Animorphs.

Danielle: 25:10 Spoilers.

Amanda: 25:12 Well, okay, I'm sorry. Spoiler for a 20 year old TV show.

Claire: 25:19 *laughter* I'll, I'll allow it.

Amanda: 25:20 Thanks, Claire. She's our TV police, so I feel safe. So overall, what do we think? Strong book? I thought, yes. Claire?

Claire: 25:28 I think medium-strong.

Amanda: 25:29 Medium, strong? That's fair. Dani?

Danielle: 25:32 Absolutely! All day long, every day. Love Betsy Cornwell. Can't wait to see what she does next.

Amanda: 25:37 Alright. So we got a strong, a medium-strong, and all day, everyday. So there you go. Forest Queen by Betsy Cornwell.

Danielle: 25:43 That's our show for today, friends. Thank you so much for joining us, Claire!

Claire: 25:47 Thank you for having me, it's such an honor.

Amanda: 25:50 Honor? Oh my God, we got honor-ed!

Danielle: 25:53 You can find us on Instagram and Twitter @yacafepodcast, we'd love to hear from you. And if you're enjoying the show, please consider leaving us a review on itunes. Happy reading!