

YA Cafe Podcast



Episode 26: Fresh Ink feat. Lamar Giles

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Danielle: 00:00 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 Fresh Ink, an anthology of short stories and other works edited by Lamar Giles. Grab a mug of your favorite beverage, friends and let's talk books

Ad: 00:17 Find even more book reviews, teaching ideas, and Secondary ELA resources at TeachNouvelle.com.

Speaker 3: 00:24 Welcome, y'all! As always, our first segment will be spoiler-free so you can stick around even if you haven't checked out the new anthology yet. I'm Danielle Hall, an 8th and 9th grade English teacher, and I blog at TeachNouvelle.com, and we are joined today by Lamar Giles, a YA author and the editor of the new anthology Fresh Ink. Thanks for joining me, Lamar.

Lamar: 00:44 Thank you for having me.

Danielle: 00:46 All right, so let's jump in with you. Do you wanna like, talk a little bit about your writing life and your experience as an author before this editing project?

Lamar: 00:58 Sure, um, I've been writing for many, many years now, um, since I was a kid, really, but really got serious about it when I was in my early twenties. It took me about 10 years of just steady work and, uh, improvement to sell my first Young Adult novel, which was Fake ID and since then I've published two more, Endangered and Overturned. I'll have two more Young Adult novels out next year, or rather one Young Adult and one Middle Grade.

Danielle: 01:22 Yeah. So I read Overturned, which I shouted out on the show last week. For our listeners who didn't listen last week, which you know, parentheses, you totally should, it is a YA thriller set in Vegas and it just has a really awesome kick-butt protagonist. And it's a girl, and you're a dude, and I haven't read a lot of books by dudes that have kick-butt girl protagonists that are written well, so like, props for that.

Lamar: 01:52 Thank you.

Danielle: 01:52 Do you have sisters?

Lamar: 01:53 I do. I have two sisters, three sisters. I'm sorry, I lost count

Danielle: 01:59 *laughter*

Lamar: 01:59 And I also had the benefit of almost all of my beta readers being women. So that's my editor, my agent, my friends, and so I have a lot of guidance. I always say if it's right it's them, and if I messed it up that's on me.

Danielle: 02:13 That's amazing. So like, did you live in Vegas? It was very immersive.

Lamar: 02:19 I did not. In fact, when I got the idea for the book, I never been to Vegas

Danielle: 02:23 *gasp*

Lamar: 02:23 and I hesitated, I was like, I don't know. The key thing I was looking at was it'd be cool to have a protagonist who played poker,

Danielle: 02:31 Yeah!

Lamar: 02:31 but I live in Virginia and we don't really have a gaming culture here. Like, if people play poker it's at someone's house on a Saturday night, that sort of thing. And I was like, if I want to do it, I need to have it in an iconic gaming city, which was even going to be Atlantic City or Las Vegas. And I felt Las Vegas was much more iconic, but I didn't know anything about it, and so I decided to take a trip out there just to see how I felt. An I got lucky ...

Danielle: 02:54 Business trip

Lamar: 02:54 Yeah, a business trip. *laughter* Write everything up. And um, I've gotten lucky and made a very good friend who was an author/illustrator, her name is Daria Peoples Riley and Daria's husband is a Las Vegas native, they live there now, and he just is super connected in the city and was able to take me around and give me so much good information that when we were done I was like, "I have to write this book."

Danielle: 03:20 That is amazing. I definitely was going to ask you if you had spent like 10 years there.

Lamar: 03:26 It's amazing when you find the right people and you take good notes. I took like a thousand photos over three days, something like three or four hours of video, 12 hours of audio, and with the guidance of the people I met there (because I would have them read little things along the way) it really made all the difference.

Danielle: 03:44 That is truly incredible. And I wanted to talk about this other community that you are a part of. You are a founding member of the We Need Diverse books initiative. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Lamar: 03:57 Sure, um, We Need Diverse books started in 2014. Uh, essentially it was the brainchild of Ellen Oh who writes these really, really great Korean-based fantasies, and Ellen pretty much talked to me and some of her other author friends about just making a statement online about the sort of books we feel we need more of, because the more diverse authors and readers we met in our career we started to hear the same stories over and over, like, "We never saw people that looked like us. We always wished in the stuff

we liked to read that we can see people who look like us." And Ellen said we should just do a hashtag, #weneeddiversebooks. And we were planning to do it around the time that Book Expo America was launching the second phase of their conference, which was called BookCon. And BookCon was announcing they had all these great children's authors, the best children's authors in the world, I mean it was something, something very, um, hyperbolic. And the thing was they were all white authors and there was a cat.

Danielle: 04:57 Ugh.

Lamar: 04:57 All white authors and a cat which was Grumpy Cat. I don't know if anybody even remembers Grumpy Cat now, but when that happened Ellen was like, 'we should launch the hashtag now.' We did that and within a week it was trending pretty much everywhere. By the time the hashtag campaign was done, we had over 150 million Internet impressions.

Danielle: 05:16 And I was going to say that I saw pictures from BookCon this year and it was like Angie Thomas, Nikki Stone, Jason Reynolds, like everyone was there. And I am going next year, I am going. I already have a couch to sleep on.

Lamar: 05:30 *laughter* Yeah. It's amazing the difference we've seen since then because the BookCon organizers actually invited us out that year to have a panel, and so we went. We decided, you know, we're not going to just be people who gripe online and don't do anything, we were like, 'they're asking us to come out.' We organized a panel, it was 300 people crammed in a room, standing room only. By the time it was done, like, every major media outlet, one to talk to us. I got interviewed by NPR that same day, and there was so much momentum that Ellen said, "We can't just let this die off, which should form a nonprofit", which we did, and since then we've started all sorts of initiatives to try to change the face of publishing. We have our internship program which helps subsidize the living expenses for summer interns in publishing in New York. We have a mentorship program which helps set up aspiring creatives, so writers and illustrators, with people who have industry knowledge so they are better prepared to start their careers. We have the Walter Dean Myers Award which we award every year for outstanding works of diverse literature illustration. And we had one of my favorites, which is the WNDB In the Classroom initiative where we actually give books to needy classrooms so kids can see themselves in stories.

Danielle: 06:40 We are definitely linking in our show notes to these initiatives that you're talking about. Our audience is mostly teachers and librarians, so if you do fall into this group that needs some books, this organization will hook you up.

Lamar: 06:57 That is us!

Danielle: 06:57 So how is Fresh Ink connected to the We Need Diverse Books, like how did that project come into being?

Lamar: 07:05 Well, it's a couple things there. One is we wanted to help put more diverse stories into the hands of children and we figured the short story format works in a sense that they get to see a whole lot of different representation in one book. So you know, particularly for children who may not have the means to get several books, they can be exposed to different authors and when they have the means they can move on to that author's novels or something else. Uh, the other part of it is that the proceeds from the anthology sales actually go to the organization, so all the authors involved voluntarily gave up their right to royalties so that the organization could use that money to further fund the programs. So it's two fold, we help put more stories in the

world and we help try to keep the organization solvent to maintain the cycle of trying to change the face of publishing.

Danielle: 07:54 That is so cool. Fresh Ink is definitely a book that belongs in every high school classroom library. All right, so I definitely want to jump in to talking about the short stories and usually we split our episodes into a spoiler-free and spoiler section, but short stories kind of happen in the blink of an eye and it makes it really difficult to separate it in that way. So I was thinking that we could start off with some general nerding out about stories and then you know, do the Things We Like A Latte and then get into specific stories in the second half.

Lamar: 08:31 That sounds great. All right, so one of the things that I was thinking about, particularly when I was reading this anthology with my wife Amanda, who doesn't like short stories, is what makes a short story 'work'. I like short stories, I think they're awesome, but there are definitely some short stories that you know, you think, "Oh, I wish it were whole novel!" or "This could've been, you know, a short film." or whatever. Like what makes for you, Lamar, a short story sing?

Lamar: 09:03 I love a short story that's self contained. And I don't mean it can't be part of a larger world that may be explored in a novel, but I like the idea of a short story that wraps up all of its threads in the 10 or 15 pages and it doesn't give the sense that it's the smaller piece of something bigger that you have to read to really get it. So that's the sort of thing I love and I really like short stories that are economic with their language. You know, I think about some of the short story writers I studied in college, um, Tobias Wolf comes to mind, and so like I think about his stories Bullet In the Brain and um, Smorgasbord which do a whole lot in a very small amount of space, so that sort of thing really resonates with me. Um, with the authors in Fresh Ink, I think they all display a great amount of skill with the short story form in different ways though.

Danielle: 09:51 I completely agree. So this anthology starts off with a short story by Jason Reynolds called Eraser Tattoo. And the reason why that is exactly what I'm looking for in all of my short stories is that it's a short scene, like it is a snapshot and it perfectly encapsulates the protagonists feelings about that whole day in like a 15 minute exchange.

Lamar: 10:18 I can speak to that story a little bit because, um, kind of let you into some behind the scenes stuff. For one, I feel like it's almost a cheat to say I'm an editor on this because all of these people are like, consummate professionals. So like, when they turn in drafts in, there's not a whole lot of work to be done. I mean at that point all you're doing is helping them to clarify things, and with Eraser Tattoo for example, um, when Jason turned in the initial draft, it was written more like it was 'any city USA.' It wasn't really a named area, but I was reading it I'm like, "Jason, if it feels like it's New York and possibly Brooklyn, um, if it is, there may be no reason to play coy with it. You might want to just state that, but it's up to you." And it's that sort of thing, it's like if you want it to be any city USA, I'm not going to tell Jason Reynolds, you can't do that.

Danielle: 11:08 *laughter*

Lamar: 11:08 But I'm like, if you're, if you're writing about Brooklyn and I think we should say is Brooklyn.

Danielle: 11:12 Yeah. And I think, I was listening to a podcast on superheroes yesterday and it was talking about New York just being so important to the American mythos. Like, it's important that it's New York and it's important that it's Brooklyn and not just because of the, you know, gentrification that's happening there, but because we're all New Yorkers in a way.

Lamar: 11:36 Yeah.

Danielle: 11:36 Like it's the city that represents us. One of the things I wanted to talk about, so I love this show on NPR called Code Switch, with Gene Demby and Shereen Marisol Meraji. And one of the things that they bring up on their show is what they call the 'explanatory comma.' For listeners who are not familiar with that show or this idea, the explanatory comma is what they've named the act of explaining something for a different, particularly white audience. An example they give on their show is if they talked about Tupac and they said "Comma, a rapper and performer, blah blah blah", whereas on the flip side of that if somebody said Jeopardy, there would never be "Comma, a game show that blah blah blah." So there's just kind of a divide in what people are quote unquote "expected" to know. And in Fresh Ink, one of the contributions by Sarah Farizan stops to explain to non-Persian audiences what certain foods are. And so that's an explanatory comma because I've never eaten those foods and so to bring me into the world, Sarah has stopped to explain those foods. I was thinking that we could like, chat about this concept, and when do you decide to have an explanatory comma?

Lamar: 13:00 I think honestly it's author preference because I've seen stories over the years that don't, they don't break to explain anything to you and I'll be honest, that's starting to become my preference. In particular if I don't know what the thing is, I sorta enjoy reading something and saying 'let me find out more about it on my own' and not leaving it to the author to kind of coach me through. But I, that's not a criticism for authors that do it, 'cause Sarah does it well in her story and I think it comes down to where the authors comfort level is. Um, I don't know if I do it like, I hadn't heard the explanation of it until you said it to me and now I'm wondering like, what places in my own work have I gone with the explanatory comma? And I want to be more wary of it going forward because I think I'd like to get away from taking those breaks and just trusting the reader to be able to infer or find out on their own. Reminds me of like a rule in comedy where you, you don't tell the joke for the person who's not going to get it. You tell it for the people who will, and then the other people need to catch up, that sort of thing.

Danielle: 14:04 Yeah, I love it. And you know, you have another author in the anthology, Aminah Mae Safi and I read recently by her Not the Girls You're Looking For and man, she does NOT use explanatory commas, and I loved it. I just had Google open next to me and I was, like, she has untranslated Arabic and it was so refreshing to just truly have an immersive experience in the story.

Lamar: 14:33 Well, she's a fantastic writer, you know, she actually is in the anthology because she won the short story contest.

Danielle: 14:39 Oooh.

Lamar: 14:40 She entered the contest before she had that book deal and she was competing with something like 100 or more writers and her story was just amazing and we saw that she had the chops, and there were some other writers that were close but in the end the judging panel was like, 'this is the one.'

Danielle: 14:58 Yeah, I loved it. I loved that book and I love the mix. And, and like you said, there's no judge for the authors that choose to use the explanatory comma or not. It's a preference, but I think that it is important for readers to understand when it's happening. And with that friends will 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 Fresh Ink and dig a little deeper.

Danielle: 15:33 Hello Listener. Are you sitting there thinking to yourself, "Gee, this is the best podcast ever! I hope they last forever, and I can't wait to see what comes next on the show." Well, here is how you can support us, support our authors, and prepare for next week. Next week, our episode will be on the book, *Seafire* by Natalie C. Parker, so if you want to pre-order copy using our affiliate link that will support the author in their first week of sales (which we all know are super important), and we get a small kickback which we will use to continue bringing you this awesome podcast. Happy reading!

Danielle: 16:22 Welcome back, y'all. It's time for *Things We Like A Latte*. Lamar, what's your brew of choice this week?

Lamar: 16:29 These are books and they're books everybody knows, but I'm going to bring them up because right now in South Carolina there are police departments that are trying to get them removed from school reading lists. So I'm going to recommend - particularly the people in South Carolina - *The Hate You Give* by Angie Thomas and *All American Boys* by Jason Reynolds & Brendan Kylie.

Danielle: 16:48 Yeah, I mean South Carolina is trying to get these off the shelves of classroom libraries, so we just want them on the shelves, right?

Lamar: 16:56 Absolutely. So if you can do anything to help those books stay visible for those kids that need them in South Carolina, that's going to be my recommendation for the week. And how about you, Danielle?

Danielle: 17:08 Well Lamar, let me tell you. I am a huge fan of escape rooms and I've been making them for my students for the past year, year and a half, but we have recently purchased some of these boxed escape rooms from Barnes and Noble and we tried a lot of them. They were not all successful, but then we found the Unlock brand, it's *Unlocked Mystery Adventures*. My favorite one is called *The Tonipal Treasure*, it's a card game mixed with an app, and the illustrations are beautiful, and the puzzles are clever, and I just love everything about them. So I'm going to link to a whole bunch of them in the show notes, I hope that everyone plays them at home. We're going to take a quick break and when we come back we'll return to our discussion on *Fresh Ink*. 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: 18:25 Welcome back to the YA Cafe! We're continuing our discussion on the new anthology *Fresh Ink* edited by our guest, Lamar Giles. If you haven't read this yet, we want to warn you again that this segment will contain spoilers. Lamar, I usually do a summary, but since you're here, would you like to summarize this book?

Lamar: 18:44 Okay. *Fresh Ink* is a compilation of stories from Young Adult fiction superstars. Names you will totally recognize, Jason Reynolds, Malinda Lo, Nicola Yoon, Daniel Jose Older, Sharon G. Flake, Melissa de la Cruz. I mean, I can name everybody in here, all their names on the cover. You've read these people, you know them. We have a couple of newbies, Aminah Mae Safi, and Schuyler Bailar. Please check us out. I always say if you like to read this is an anthology you'll want to read, and if you don't like to read, this is an anthology you'll want to read.

Danielle: 19:16 And a never before published one-act play by Walter Dean Myers.

Lamar: 19:22 That is correct.

Danielle: 19:23 All right, well let's start there. Like, how did you get something that's never before been published?

Lamar: 19:29 Okay, so this might be boring behind the scenes stuff, but I'll spill it for you. The editor who helps me, so I'm on the book cover but whenever you do this thing, you're always working with an editor inside the publishing house. So at the Penguin Random House imprint Crown, the editor who actually helped me out to make sure everything looks great, her name is Phoebe. Me and Phoebe go way back. But to answer your question, Phoebe edited Walter Dean Myers for like, 20 plus years and as you know, he's no longer with us, but she's still in contact with his family. You know, his son Chris Meyers is an accomplished illustrator, and they have been super supportive of We Need Diverse Books and because Walter really inspired us to do things like these anthologies they're willing to provide us with some materials that he may not have published, (or published a long time ago) to include in the book.

Danielle: 20:23 That's so great. I love this behind the scenes stuff. So I was thinking we could each shout out a story that we really loved. When we thought Amanda was going to be recording this with us she called dibs on the Malinda Lo story, but she's not here so ha ha, I'm talking about it now. The Malinda Lo story is called Meet Cute and it takes place at a comicon situation. *sigh* I just love Malinda Lo. I feel seen. I love the representation of queer girls and queer girls of color. And you know, it's right in the title folks, it's a meet-cute. The girl meets a girl, it's awesome. Like, I felt seen as a queer woman, I felt seen as a nerd. It was great. How about you?

Lamar: 21:12 Okay, so you know you're going to get me in trouble having me try to pick a favorite out of this book. They're all sort of like closely connected to me, but this is what I will say. Nicola Yoon's, Superhuman really speaks to my sensibilities as a comic book guy growing up.

Danielle: 21:26 You're wearing a Punisher shirt today.

Lamar: 21:28 I'm wearing a Punisher shirt right now, and when I saw that Nicola, whose books I love, The Sun Is Also A Star, and Everything, Everything, I thought they were fantastic. When she told us that she was going to do a superhero story, I was like, "Whoa, that's a swerve. I can't wait to see it." And the draft she turned in actually made me jealous. I'm like, "Is this what, is this what a first draft is supposed to look like? Because I haven't been doing it right."

Danielle: 21:54 *laughter*

Lamar: 21:54 I thought it was fantastic story and it really spoke to the things that I grew up loving.

Danielle: 21:58 I love that story too, it was so good. It's the last story in the anthology and it had me on the edge of my seat and then I was like, "No, no, it can't be over!"

Lamar: 22:10 I would not be opposed to Nicola writing a full length superhero novel.

Danielle: 22:16 Or like, ten of them.

Lamar: 22:18 Or like 10 of them, yeah.

Danielle: 22:20 Or TV! You could write TV, Nicola.

Lamar: 22:21 She can do anything, I mean anything she writes I'm there for.

Danielle: 22:24 Yep, me too, I'll totally buy it. So another story that I loved was Schuyler Bailar's Catch, Pull, Drive. So I'm going to do an explanatory comma here. Schuyler Bailar is a swimmer on the Harvards Men Varsity swim team, and he is the first openly transgender man to compete in any Division 1 NCAA sport. The story is fun, like, I'm not a swimmer, but it definitely gave me insight into the challenges that Schuyler faced and the sort of sacrifices that Schuyler made. Beyond just facing a series of surgeries, and facing some social stigma, and struggles like that. Like, Schuyler also sacrificed some records in being a female swimmer, and knew that he would have a lot more work to do to catch up with male swimmers, right? So he was losing status in order to gain this other bigger, more important thing. And one of the things we're going to link to in the show notes is his beautiful interview with Ellen. Loved it.

Lamar: 23:33 Schuyler, first of all, Schuyler is amazing. I don't know if people know this because it's such a great story, but his is Schuyler's first piece of fiction.

Danielle: 23:41 Yeah. I mean he's a swimmer, right? Like, when, when does he have to write?

Lamar: 23:45 Yeah, they keep Schuyler's schedule's pretty packed between class and practice, but Schuyler did his first piece of fiction for us and so we've all been trying to encourage him to consider writing more. We think his voice is needed and we'd love to hear more of whatever he wants to write.

Danielle: 24:03 Yeah. Superhero fiction.

Lamar: 24:04 Superhero fiction. He can collaborate with Nicola.

Danielle: 24:09 Right? *laughter* We're just doing some fantasy book shelving. How about you, Lamar? What's another story that you want to shout out?

Lamar: 24:14 Uh, let's see. I think Sharon G. Flake's, A Boy's Duty is notable as a period piece. Uh, it's set around World War Two and it deals with a boy who has, uh, concerns about his family and going to war. And I think unfortunately war stories are one of those evergreen topics, right? They can really apply to any period of time, even in quote unquote "peace times", if you're talking about the situations people deal with in countries that have ongoing wars. And I think there's just a lot of relevant emotional stuff Sharon does there that comes across really well.

Danielle: 24:47 I agree, I really liked it. I mean, it's not like I didn't, like, I loved this anthology, I loved it all. And so I did want to kind of quickly shout out the other stories and then we're going to have to wrap up. So the other stories in this anthology are; Don't Pass Me By by Eric Gansworth. We mentioned the Aminah Mae Safi story, it's called Be Cool For Once. The one act play by Walter Dean Myers is called Tags. Why I Learned to Cook is the one we talked about, written by Sarah Farizan, which has a great focus on Persian food. A Stranger At the Bochinché by Daniel Jose Older is like an urban fantasy, which is really cool. Particularly for readers who liked the Trail of Lightning episodes, it's gonna feel similar. You mentioned A Boy's Duty, One Voice by Melissa de la Cruz, that was one of Amanda's favorites. She's not here to talk about it, but she would definitely want me to weigh in that. That was an amazing story. There is a graphic ... Okay, so do you say graphic short story? Like, it sounds wrong.

Lamar: 25:50 I think we have to call it a graphic short story. It's not a graphic novel. I don't really know what other category, but yes, we have a graphic short story in there.

Danielle: 25:58 But it's not graphic in that way, it's just ...

Lamar: 26:03 Oh no no no!

Danielle: 26:03 Like, we need a name for it, but

Lamar: 26:05 It looks like a comic book.

Danielle: 26:06 I loved that. And it kind of like, pulled me back to the How I Resist anthology, which was also a mix of short stories, and interviews, and graphic short stories, and things like that. So I loved Paladin Samurai by Gene Luen Yang, and then Catch, Pull, Drive and Superhuman, which we talked about. So that is the amazing anthology. Definitely a must purchase for every classroom library, high school classroom library, and for every school library. Stay tuned in the next couple of weeks and we will be giving some of those away.

Lamar: 26:41 I hope everybody gets a chance to check out Fresh Ink, it's really great. I'm not saying that just because I edited it. I got to read the stories first and I just want you all to have the same joy I had.

Danielle: 26:50 Thank you so much for joining us! I know you've been on the road and you've had a busy summer, and I just really appreciate you taking the time to talk books with us.

Lamar: 27:00 Oh no anytime. Thank you.

Danielle: 27:03 That's our show for today, friends. You can find Lamar on Instagram @lamargiles and find out more about the We Need Diverse Books at Diversebooks.org. You can find us on Instagram and Twitter @yacafepodcast, we'd love to hear from you! And if you're enjoying the show, please consider leaving us a review on iTunes. Happy reading!