



YA Café Podcast  
Episode 33: *Empress of All Seasons*  
08 November 2018

- Danielle: [00:01](#) Welcome to the YA Cafe where we share conversations about books for teachers, breeders, and caffeine addicts everywhere. On today's episode, we'll be talking about *Empress of All Seasons* by Emiko Jean. Grab a mug of your favorite beverage, friends, and let's talk books.
- Amanda: [00:18](#) 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
- New Speaker: [00:25](#) and I'm Danielle Hall, an 8th and 9th grade English teacher and I blog at [teachnouvelle.com](http://teachnouvelle.com). Mari's world is split into two kinds of people—magical creatures and spirits called Yokai, and the humans who oppress and enslave them. Although she is a yokai, Mari has trained her whole life to conquer the four seasons and become the empress, hiding her identity. But leaving her safe mountain town for the capital city has shown her how harsh life truly is for the other yokai, and the prince shows a tenderness that gives her hope for the future. Can Mari conquer the seasons, and if she does, can she betray the prince she's come to care for? So one of the reasons that I picked up this novel was because I thought that the blurb kind of made it sound like *The Hunger Games* meets *The Selection*.
- Amanda: [01:09](#) What do you mean by that?
- Danielle: [01:10](#) So *The Selection* is like a Bachelor type contest where a bunch of girls go to the castle and compete for the princess heart or whatever. But in this book they have to win in this arena of these seasonal rooms to get to marry the prince. Only one can survive. What did you think of it?
- Amanda: [01:30](#) So overall I thought there was a lot that a lot of people will really like. Like the *Hunger Games* elements I thought were really interesting. The rooms are really interesting. I wish we could have spent longer on them. Overall. I think there's a lot to like in this book and I think a lot of students will really like it. For me it was pretty uneven and I didn't love a lot of parts of it, but I think that it has a lot of really good elements that people are really going to get into. What did you think?
- Danielle: [01:55](#) Well, I really liked the setting and I loved the folklore aspect of it. You know, you get a lot of Japanese folklore with the Yokai. Um, we see many different kinds of Yokai. I loved that. I thought that was really cool. Yeah. But it was kind of also an Explanatory Comma, which is great because I don't know anything about Japanese folklore. So I needed, you know, oh, this is a, an Animal Wife, Comma, someone who marries a man and then steals his fortune.

Amanda: [02:25](#) Is that like a common thing in Japanese folklore or was it things that she came up with?

Danielle: [02:30](#) They're real!

Amanda: [02:30](#) cool.

Danielle: [02:30](#) I thought this was actually really cool because I kind of, um, I read the book and I had Google images out and I would, every time something was introduced I would look it up so that I had like a visual. Loved it. Not that like her words didn't provide enough visual, but like, you know, anyone can describe a unicorn as a horse with a horn, but like where's the horn, you know, on its head. Well, you know, is it pointed like northwest or like pictures are helpful?

Amanda: [02:57](#) They are, I am not arguing with you. I'm just picturing a Unicorn as a horse with a horn on its butt and it's never going away.

New Speaker: [03:05](#) So I mean it's just one of those things. It's like we all have cultural baggage and like folklore is such a great example of something that we can really take for granted in our own culture. Um, which is why I think it was really cool to read this book and extend my own folklore knowledge.

Amanda: [03:23](#) Definitely. It made me really interested in Japanese folklore. Now that I know that all these creatures are real, I want to dig into it more. I want to find more stuff.

New Speaker: [03:31](#) Yeah. I also really liked the setting, like it was like fantasy but not super fantastic. Like the world's still felt small. I felt like the mountain was just, you know, over Yonder we had like the two very distinct settings. We had the mountain where she grew up and then we had the city and the palace where the contest was.

Amanda: [03:52](#) And those are two very distinct settings and they were both really well fleshed out I thought.

New Speaker: [03:56](#) Yeah. And it was easy to mentally distinguish them. Right? Like you had the mountain and you had the palace. And so it made it very easy to enter this world.

Amanda: [04:06](#) So talking about the setting, one thing I really enjoyed was the different seasonal rooms that our competitors had to go through and basically to conquer the four seasons, all of the competitors have to go into these four magical rooms that

New Speaker: [04:21](#) are seasonal

Amanda: [04:22](#) are seasonal

New Speaker: [04:23](#) the fall room, the winter room.

Amanda: [04:25](#) We start in the summer room and they're faced with all of these different trials that are seasonally based. I guess

New Speaker: [04:34](#) they're each kind of like their own Hunger Games arena, but seasonal.

Amanda: [04:38](#) And they're not as murderous as Hunger Games arenas also. They're not allowed to hurt each other theoretically.

New Speaker: [04:45](#) So, you know, we are hinting that there are a crowd of girls that come to compete for the prince's affections, except it's not really like his affections.

Amanda: [04:55](#) Yeah. He's kind of just got to deal with it. Whoever wins - that's the lady (Danielle: That's it!)

New Speaker: [05:00](#) One of the things that we talked about in the summary was this split between the humans and like the emperor is a human and the Yokai who are the magical creatures and the emperor actually like oppresses the Yokai and enslaves them and so they are present in this palace and there's not supposed to be Yokai competing in the games. So that's kind of like the central conflict is like "will Mari's true identity as Yokai be revealed?" What did you think about that?

New Speaker: [05:33](#) Sorry, my brain went on a totally different direction. I was just thinking about how similar this is to Children of Blood and Bone as far as like the magical people being the ones who are oppressed.

Danielle: [05:41](#) Yeah. I get that and I think that it's just the whole thing of like oppressing the Other.

Amanda: [05:46](#) Yeah. I was thinking because there's other books that do this too, and I'm trying to remember. I think Red Queen, it's the opposite, right? Like it's the magical ones who are the oppressors.

Danielle: [05:53](#) Yeah.

Amanda: [05:54](#) And that would make sense. Like they got the power they're doing the oppressing

New Speaker: [05:57](#) and that is a violent book.

Amanda: [05:58](#) Very violent. So anyways, I'm sorry, my brain was totally scattered away thinking about all these other books in which magicians are oppressed,

Danielle: [06:06](#) I'm trying to figure out if Harry Potter qualifies, but I don't think so. Okay. But to bring it back...

Amanda: [06:11](#) Focus. Amanda...

New Speaker: [06:13](#) I just asked you about the central conflict. How did that work for you?

- Amanda: [06:17](#) I thought it worked pretty well. It was a lot of, uh, easy built intention of like, is she going to get found out? Is she gonna be able to use her powers to help her and all that kind of thing. It didn't feel like a super essential part of the story, although obviously it was while reading it, I think it helped raise the stakes.
- New Speaker: [06:33](#) Yeah. And we have two other main characters. This book is split perspective. The two other characters are Akira who is half Yokai, half human, and he is Mari's friend from back home. We also have Taro who is the prince for whom all of these young ladies are competing. One of the things that I thought was interesting is that Akira follows Mari to the palace and it sets him up as this boy from back home and that was also present in *The Selection*. We had Aspen who followed America to the competition. You haven't read the book, but yeah, it's Aspen.
- Amanda: [07:09](#) I haven't, but it's the fact that their names are America and Aspen
- New Speaker: [07:11](#) and America is like, oh my God, it's fine. It's a fun book. *The Selection* by Kiera Cass. Anyways, so he's got this sort of like chaperone feel - like looking over her.
- Amanda: [07:23](#) I didn't take them as much as the chaperone he because he's like such a squishy, cowardly boy to start with and I really, I think we need more squishy, cowardly boys in fiction.
- New Speaker: [07:32](#) We can talk more about him in the spoiler section too. And Taro's a cool character at the beginning because even though his father, you know, oppresses and enslaves the Yokai, Taro doesn't feel that way. He wants to, you know, set them free. He tries to comfort them after his father has abuse them.
- Amanda: [07:51](#) I don't know if he wants to set them free, like he feels kind of bad about it, but doesn't really do a lot about it either.
- New Speaker: [08:00](#) Yeah, and we'll definitely get more into that in the second half, but he, he is affected by them and he sees them as more than animals. 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 *Empress of All Seasons* and dig a little deeper.
- (ad): [08:30](#) Hey, y'all! Are you sitting there thinking 'this podcast is awwwwweeesome'? 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 an author's first week totals. Everyone wins! Next week, we're going to discuss *Pulp* by Robin Talley. If you'd like to help us keep bringing you great content, pre-order through the link in our shownotes. Happy reading!
- Amanda: [09:03](#) Welcome back. It's time for *Things We Like a Latte*. Danielle, what's your brew of choice this week?
- New Speaker: [09:09](#) So purely by coincidence I was reading another book at the same time as this book and the other book is *Shadow of the Fox* by Julie Kagawa and it also has a

Yokai protagonists. So you know, it has a lot of Japanese folklore. It's an adventure story, it's very poetic and I think that anybody who is enjoying Empress of All Seasons will also enjoy Shadow of the Fox by Julie Kagawa. How about you Amanda? What's your brew of choice this week?

- Amanda: [09:41](#) Well, as you may know from a couple of Things We Like a Lattes, Danielle and I have watched a lot of The Good Place and this has given me a new found interest in philosophy, which I have never had before. Zero interest in philosophy throughout my life. Um, so I started, uh, going through the philosophy Crash Course by Hank Green, done with PBS and it's really great. We're learning about like death and stuff. And,
- New Speaker: [10:08](#) and if you've never heard a Crash Course episode, I strongly recommend them. They're about 12 to 13 minutes a piece. Definitely very digestible, very upbeat, very fun. And Hank and John Green are very funny.
- Amanda: [10:21](#) It's the right amount of philosophy. If you are not familiar with philosophy.
- Danielle: [10:26](#) We're going to take a quick break, and when we come back, we'll return to our discussion on Empress of All Seasons. The rest of the show will contain spoilers, so if you're leaving us here, keep in touch on Instagram and Twitter @yacafepodcast. We'll be back after this quick break.
- Amanda: [10:53](#) Welcome back, y'all, to the YA Café. We're continuing our discussion on Empress of All Seasons. If you haven't read this yet, we want to warn you again that this segment will contain spoilers.
- New Speaker: [10:53](#) \*sings\* Spoilers.
- Amanda: [11:02](#) Okay, so you wanted to talk particularly about Mari's home in the mountains a little bit. What were your feelings on that? This is at the beginning of the novel.
- New Speaker: [11:09](#) Right, and she lives in this village of animal wives who are a bunch of Yokai who take the form of human women. They marry men and steal their fortunes. That's the whole thing. And so they're sort of like this feel to the mountain home that is a bit sinister because like, yes this is their way of life, but like one of the ways that were introduced to them is that one of Mari's friends gives birth to a boy and they don't want boys to grow up in the village. So they think that they're killing the children. But really these boys just sort of float down the river and then get rescued by the monks.
- Amanda: [11:47](#) I thought they were gonna come back. Like I thought that was going to be a plot point.
- Danielle: [11:50](#) Yeah. Can I tell you that, like I finished this book thinking that there was a sequel and there is no more.
- Amanda: [11:58](#) I feel like there could be though with the way that it's written at the end, it's like in italics and it's like she became the empress and all these things happened, but like kind of the way that it's written makes me think that it could become a

duology at the very least because it talks more about like Akira becoming this assassin and all these other things. So I feel like they made it stand standalone enough to publish it as a standalone, but that it definitely has sequel or serious potential.

- Danielle: [12:26](#) The weird world of publishing.
- Amanda: [12:28](#) It's so weird one.
- Danielle: [12:31](#) So yeah, Akira becoming an assassin
- Amanda: [12:35](#) Oof. So like I said in the first half I was like super onboard with Akira because I was like yeah, this squishy cowardly boy and then it gets like one training montage of four days and all of a sudden he's like darkness and shadowed shooting Ninja stars at people in the night and.
- New Speaker: [12:50](#) Okay. So I had some questions about that. It definitely like wasn't more than four or five days.
- Amanda: [12:56](#) It couldn't have been because I think even abbreviated. Yeah, the rooms
- Danielle: [13:00](#) and Hanako, the weapon's masters said she trained for 16 years. He gets four days and then I had this like question during one of the battle scenes, like how many Ninja Stars can you carry? Because I feel like he had a pretty endless supply until it benefited the plot for him to run out
- Amanda: [13:23](#) No, it said dozens and said he was lined with Ninja stars for that one in particular.
- Danielle: [13:27](#) Okay. So he must have spent like at least a whole day training on using multiple Ninja stars. Right.
- Amanda: [13:34](#) Well you got to throw them one at a time,
- New Speaker: [13:36](#) but you still have to like grab them anyway, whatever training montage to short accelerated training, which was a problem that I had with Hullmetal Girls too, right?,
- Amanda: [13:46](#) Right.
- New Speaker: [13:46](#) They just had this like accelerated training and then you know, that was all they needed.
- Amanda: [13:51](#) I think for me it was less the training and more just the dramatic shift in his character. He was a point of view character and like his chapters suddenly just read so differently so quickly and like I have been through some pretty extended training montage in my life
- New Speaker: [14:08](#) boot camp-

Amanda: [14:08](#) and it's not like an overnight thing. So I don't know, I just thought that like the drastic change in the personality was, was really what threw me off even less than the suddenly being awesome at Ninja stars - it was at his whole personality changed.

New Speaker: [14:22](#) Yeah, I would agree with that. And I also did not understand why he was necessary to the plot. Like why couldn't he have just stayed back home and been a friend back home?

Amanda: [14:34](#) I think he was just there so that we could see the revolution, the revolution, and like Asami's treachery and all this other,

New Speaker: [14:42](#) you know, who I really wanted to be the other pov in the story?

Amanda: [14:45](#) Who is that?

New Speaker: [14:48](#) Asami.

Amanda: [14:48](#) Asami was cool.

New Speaker: [14:49](#) I think this would have been a really cool split perspective book between Maori and Asami. I think that would be cool.

Amanda: [14:55](#) But the other split perspective you threw out there as a possibility was Hanako,

New Speaker: [15:01](#) Hanako, the weapons master?

Amanda: [15:02](#) Hanako, the weapons master. And I think that would be as good as the Asami perspective because like what Asami sees that Hanako doesn't see is the rooms

Danielle: [15:12](#) which we get through Mari. So you're right,

Amanda: [15:14](#) but I like the descriptions of Asami's magic were so cool. Like I just wish that we could have had a lot more of that. There is a scene, it's, it's her death scene, I guess where she's describing all of these spiders getting sent out

Danielle: [15:29](#) Right, because she's Yokai, too.

Amanda: [15:30](#) Oh, it's so cool. I really, really liked the spider magic.

New Speaker: [15:34](#) Yeah. And also she's queer.

Amanda: [15:37](#) Oh yeah, that too. You got to gay it up for YA Cafe.

New Speaker: [15:41](#) Before you die a cold death.

Amanda: [15:44](#) I don't - It didn't feel trophy to me.

New Speaker: [15:46](#) No, because Hanako, also queer, doesn't die. It's funny because we've started reading Pulp for next week and it's about 1950's lesbian pulp fiction. And one of

the things that the publishers like required is that any woman who was gay throughout the novel like had to meet " an appropriate end." i.e, die

- Amanda: [16:12](#) (sarcasm) you've got to suffer, you can't just be gay and happy gives kids all kind of ideas. But this was not that to be clear.
- New Speaker: [16:19](#) Yeah. No, I, I liked it. I mean I, I thought the, you know, it's better to have it and have it not be central than to not have it. Not every book we read has to be a queer book. I know.
- Amanda: [16:32](#) Shocker.
- New Speaker: [16:34](#) So one of the things that I love about Asami and I really do love Asami as a character. She calls out Mari and she says, Mari, I can't be in an alliance with you because you have a Yokai serving you. She has Sei serving her in her chambers and she hasn't told Sei that she's Yokai because she doesn't want to get kicked out of the competition, but she hasn't sent Sei away either. So she's complicit in Sei's slavery. What did you think about that?
- Amanda: [17:07](#) I don't know if I agree with you on that because Marie had no way to remove Sei's collar
- New Speaker: [17:13](#) because Yokai can't touch the collars. That's the whole thing.
- Amanda: [17:16](#) If Mari had sent Sei away, she would have just gone back to the innkeeper with no profit, no way of escape, anything like that and probably with worse treatment than what she's getting from Mari. So I don't know if I agree with you. I agree with the optics for Asami, but also she didn't mention it after Asami found out that Mari was Yokai. So I think that we have read a lot of books where that is the case where the person is like super close with their servant but are still complicit. I'm not sure if this falls into that because Mari is also a member of this oppressed class, but she's in hiding. She could have compromised herself and like it is not fair to ask oppressed people to compromise their safety.
- Danielle: [18:00](#) Right. But I'm not talking about compromising her safety or outing herself, but she does still benefit from the servitude. Like she doesn't just say go sit over there, Sei, you know, like she still benefits... So different points of view. But I liked that Asami called her out.
- Amanda: [18:21](#) Yeah, it was good. Especially because at the time Asami didn't know that she was. Okay. And I know you love steam punk stuff, so I'm sure you loved Taro's tinkering around with his little flying birds and stuff.
- Danielle: [18:31](#) Yes, I love that. It reminded me of another book that I love, which is *Mechanica* by Betsy Cornwell. And in *Mechanica*, which is a Cinderella retelling, the Cinderella character is like an inventor and does all sorts of these little cool animal doodles just like Taro. So this really took me back to that and... Probably more important to the book then his little bird is the fact that he is the one who invented the Yokai's collars and he had no idea that they would be used as a tool of oppression, but he is responsible for creating them.



Amanda: [19:08](#) Yeah. I'm not sure how much you can buy the whole like, oh, I didn't know

New Speaker: [19:12](#) Thank you. I totally get that. It's like, I don't know if you're going to create something that explodes, which the collars can't... Like... I'm extrapolating here....

Amanda: [19:20](#) Right.

New Speaker: [19:20](#) But if you're going to create like an explosive, you have to be... You have to imagine it's going to be used in war. If you're going to create a metal that suppresses Yokai powers, you have to imagine that you're anti Yokai father is going to find a way to use it against the Yokai.

Amanda: [19:37](#) Yeah. The biggest benefit you could give to Taro at this point, it was that he was very young when this happened.

New Speaker: [19:43](#) Yeah.

Amanda: [19:43](#) So like he just might not have even thought about it as an option, but at the same time like, come on, man.

New Speaker: [19:48](#) Yeah. But I think that this leads more naturally, this idea that, you know, Taro won't accept his complicity in the system. It leads more naturally to later when he sees his father be murdered and he assumes it's by a Yokai and thus begins to vehemently hate Yokai

Amanda: [20:12](#) Well, it wasn't just assumed, right? He got told that his father was killed by his half brother who actually killed his father, you know, intrigue, intrigue, blah blah blah.

New Speaker: [20:22](#) But like he went from like, "oh Yokai are so oppressed" to like "kill them all.!=" And I think that that makes a little more sense if you think, oh, well, you know, he never really accepted his own role in the system or his own privilege.

Amanda: [20:41](#) Yeah, I think that's... I think that's totally fair to say. I mean, he didn't hate the system to want to stick it out to become emperor, to change it. Like he wanted out from the beginning and he had more power than anybody else in the world to change the system. And he was like, no, I don't want to be forced to marry-

New Speaker: [21:00](#) Hand against forehead!

Amanda: [21:01](#) I just want to make my little birds and go out and be free in the wide world. Like, look, come on guy. You can literally end slavery.

New Speaker: [21:11](#) Yeah. "But I don't want that responsibility! I never wanted it!"

Amanda: [21:17](#) Okay Guy. So yeah, I thought that. I thought that Taro was like, I didn't mind his character. I know you hated him from the beginning, from the beginning I was like, well this is fine. Like oh, he's going to have a change of heart and stick around and, and then he winds up being a dirt bag and I'm like, all right.

New Speaker: [21:33](#) It just, he, he bothered me because he was like, ah, I don't want to get married. All these girls just viewed me as a piece of meat. But then as soon as he sees Mari, he's like, yeah, she's hot. I want her.

Amanda: [21:49](#) But she's not hot though. She was just like, she's sarcastic and smart. Muscly,

New Speaker: [21:57](#) muscly?

Amanda: [21:57](#) Muscly. They talk about her like muscly.

New Speaker: [22:03](#) So you kind of referenced this in the beginning that the pacing was uneven and that the rooms did not feel like they took enough time.

Amanda: [22:13](#) Yeah, I think especially the first room was a missed opportunity because we went from literally hundreds of girls down to 10.

Danielle: [22:21](#) Yeah,

Amanda: [22:22](#) Like have been more like there could have been more of a winnowing I think.

Danielle: [22:25](#) Yeah, and we didn't really get to know them. We only got to know Asami, which was like cool, but like one of the things that was great about Hunger Games is that you got to know some of the other competitors.

Amanda: [22:37](#) So many of the other competitors! The ones that were really ruthless, the ones that were just kind of bumbling around. I don't know. I, I also missed that you got that a little bit with the Bow and Arrow girl, but she was just kind of the misdirect for Asami.

Danielle: [22:53](#) Yeah, for sure.

Amanda: [22:54](#) Which was pretty obvious. I think.

Danielle: [22:56](#) I also wonder how this book would have felt pacing wise if we didn't have so much time at the mountain home, but I guess that really would have changed the stakes for Mari and like what she was trying to accomplish. We wouldn't have understood her motivations.

Amanda: [23:11](#) Yeah, I think it is not often I say this, but I do think that this book would have been better as multiple books. I know, I know it's happening, but I just think that everything at the end was so rushed. It was like we... She became the emperors and then all of a sudden we're going back home because the army is and it was a revolution.

Danielle: [23:30](#) Yeah, like a rushed revolution.

Amanda: [23:32](#) It was just too much. Very close together. I think that it could have been compelling to end a number of places like pre-revolution. Overall, I think there are a lot of things to enjoy about this book. It had awesome setting and some amazing folklore. I agree and I definitely think there's a lot of students who are

going to really like this book. I think that anybody who enjoyed like Hunger Games, The Selection, Matched... Like any of these kinds of books, probably also Children of Blood and Bone. It has a lot of similar DNA and I think that it is something that a lot of people will really enjoy.

New Speaker: [24:08](#)

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