

YA Café Podcast
Episode 36: Stronger, Faster, and More Beautiful
06 December 2018

- Trigger Warning: 00:00 We want to start this episode off with a trigger warning. This episode contains conversations about rape and sexual violence.
- Intro: 00:06 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 Stronger, Faster, and More Beautiful by Arwen Elys Dayton, grab a mug of your favorite beverage friends and let's talk books.
- Ad: 00:28 Have you tried the RadioPublic App? It's a great app where you can find all of your favorite podcasts like this one. You'll experience the same great content for free and we'll receive a small kickback every time you listen there. This is a great way to support any podcasts you enjoy. Come find us over on RadioPublic.
- Amanda: 00:50 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: 00:57 And I'm Danielle Hall and 8th and 9th grade English teacher and I blog at teachnouvelle.com . Arwen Elys Dayton's new book Stronger, Faster and More Beautiful is a collection of six stories spanning a couple hundred years of human experimentation with genetic modification. Six teens provide different perspectives on the social, emotional, and political implications of this brave new world. Okay, So I really wanted to start by talking about the premise of this book. What did you think about the genetic modification? The moddling as it was called in the book?
- Amanda: 01:30 Um, I thought that genetic modification modding, I thought it was really well done. I really liked how it started off slow and kind of went through to a place that is very far away from where we are right now with like our technological advancements, but like at the beginning was pretty grounded in reality and it really liked how the separate stories kind of like guided you through all of these different phases of technology and growing pains and all these kinds of things.
- Danielle: 01:56 Right. I was really excited to read this because you know, Claire's, sister Grace, who you met at our wedding and is awesome. She works in a lab that is working on genetically modifying, um, I guess it will eventually be embryos against cystic fibrosis, to edit that out of the DNA. And so when you talk about the beginning of the book being grounded in reality and things that are coming down the line, that's like really real.

Amanda: 02:29 Yeah, it's very soon. And I think that a lot of that is painted very optimistically, uh, where these medical advances looks to be going in the good way. And then it kind of goes sideways.

Danielle: 02:39 Right, so, this book kind of like Arwen Elys Dayton said that she wrote this book to explore the space between the good intentions of modding and like us being sure to screw it up.

Amanda: 02:53 Yeah, I liked the slow descent. I think you really see that the most, like the third story in like the first two stories feel really positive. Like we have so much possibility and then the third story, it starts to get like real wonky,

Danielle: 03:09 Dark.

Amanda: 03:09 Yeah.

Danielle: 03:10 So this novel is told in six segments, six stories and six perspectives. And one of the things that I thought that the author did really well is capture six narrative voices.

Amanda: 03:24 Definitely. I think that especially the dolphin boy story,

Danielle: 03:27 Yes!

Amanda: 03:28 Was very distinct. Like it was a very clear narrator.

Danielle: 03:32 He anagramed.

Amanda: 03:33 He anagramed, he was all about anagrams.

Danielle: 03:35 Meaningful anagrams and like I love it when meaningful anagrams happened in stories like when they kind of anagram to the point that it becomes like thematically related.

Amanda: 03:46 So, how loudly did you gasp when "Tom Marvolo Riddle" became "I Am Lord Voldemort"?

Danielle: 03:53 Obviously a lot!

Amanda: 03:53 It's like, your most favorite part.

Danielle: 03:55 I am terrible at them, but I really appreciate them in fiction all the time. It's cool thing. Anagrams are cool. So, my favorite character in this book was the second narrator.

Amanda: 04:09 She was great. It was definitely my favorite story I think.

Danielle: 04:13 Yeah, and I don't want to like super giveaway this story in the spoiler free section, but you know, she really nailed like sarcastic teenage girl. Um, there were so many layers to that story. I feel like it really explored what genetic modification can do to people's lives beyond just the congratulations. You're not dead.

Amanda: 04:37 Yeah.

Danielle: 04:37 Started to explore like social stigma, it started to explore like questions of identity, which I know that you had to love because of the crash course philosophy you've been watching.

Amanda: 04:48 Yeah, It's been a lot about like personhood and like at what point you lose humanity and I find that all really interesting.

- Danielle: 04:54 Right, and so if your beginning to have your organs replaced with artificial organs, like at what point do you lose your personhood? And we can definitely dive more into that in the spoiler section.
- Amanda: 05:07 Yeah. It also really reminded me of um, Cory Doctorow's book Walkaway where a big part of it is that they discover how to like load people's brains into simulations and they're calling it like immortality without like any discussion of the existential crisis there. So, I like that this book doesn't do that. It never really loses sight of like when is it no longer ethical to do. Is there a point where it's no longer ethical? I think that I was always really good.
- Danielle: 05:34 Yeah. It was always very present and it was always well represented that different people will have different opinions on the ethics of the situation.
- Amanda: 05:42 Right.
- Danielle: 05:42 As with any medical advance. Alright. So again, we're going to give you an additional trigger warning. We are about to have a long conversation about rape.
- Amanda: 05:53 So, I really struggled with this book. I thought that it was expertly written. I thought the vision of the future was great. Um, however, we're also going to go a little more into a spoiler for the book, but if you are a teacher librarian, I really recommend you listen. One of the narrative characters in a flashback to is simpler life in California
- Danielle: 06:16 Before he was modded.
- Amanda: 06:17 Before he was modded, has a prolonged scene where he describes going to the beach at a party with his friend and getting girls drunk to sleep with them.
- Danielle: 06:29 They have a bet.

- Amanda: 06:31 They have a bet to see who can sleep with more. His friends specifically says "this stuff is so strong, but it's sweet." "You basically don't notice the alcohol." "The girls will not be paying attention to anything after a few drinks."
- Danielle: 06:44 Yeah, so it's very clear that the friend knows exactly what's going on. It is clear in the book that Jake knows what's going on.
- Amanda: 06:56 Jake is the narrative character.
- Danielle: 06:58 And it's kind of lamp shaded by one of the girls he ends up sleeping with because she's like, ha! Ha! I'm wise to your game jerk! but, she sleeps with him. It's frustrating. It definitely is. So we wanted to talk about teaching boys about consent, the representation of rape and fiction and then the problems of rape in this specific book.
- Amanda: 07:23 I spent a very long time trying to think of my response to this because I don't necessarily think that fiction needs to moralize like one of the stories in this that I really enjoyed how the main character who did a really horrible thing, but I think that the difference here comes from the way that this is portrayed in the book. It doesn't necessarily read like sexual assault because it's told from his perspective.
- Danielle: 07:49 The victims don't have names in like two out of three or four of the instances.
- Amanda: 07:55 Yeah, they don't have names; they're barely described.
- Danielle: 07:58 Yes. So the thing that it brought to mind for me was the scene in Game of Thrones where Sansa, who is like a perspective character and so important is raped and the camera pans to Tyrion to see his reaction and like it's absurd. It's a facing the victim.
- Amanda: 08:20 I think that what I struggle with is that if you have a main character who commits sexual assault, I think that it has to be clear what it is and that's where we differed when we were reading this. Because at first Danielle, you were saying like, I think that it's intentional. I think that everybody's going to read this as sexual assault. And I said I think that the way that it's written, he's just going to look like kind of a jerk, bro, guy who was kind of misogynistic. And so I went through and

I read like all of the reviews and no one has mentioned it. The only people who have mentioned him at all mentioned him as a unlikable but typical teenage boy.

Danielle: 08:59 And that's disappointing. And I feel like that is more of this culture of excusing boy's behavior because boys will be boys and like perpetuating the idea of locker room behavior and locker room talk. And like I definitely when I told you that I was trying to be optimistic, I thought that we had a better understanding of sexual assault at this point. One of the things that I wanted to mention is that there is this great video called Consent and Tea and basically it's an analogy I recommend sharing it with all of your students teachers. But it's an analogy between sex and tea. So for example, consent is like tea you can think about it this way. Uh, if you ask someone, would you like some tea? And they're like, sure, make them a cup of tea. At that point they don't have to drink the tea. Maybe, they changed their mind just because you made the tea. It's not their responsibility to accept and drink the tea. And it sort of goes on like that. And it's very cute. It's very accessible, but it covers a really serious issue.

Amanda: 10:09 I think that's a really good video. And a good analogy, but I think that when we're talking about teaching boys consent, like part of that problem is that many people don't recognize that when alcohol is involved, consent gets very muddy. Like in surveys, people say, usually boys will say "I would never sexually assault someone", but then when they're given the actual scenarios, like would you ever pressure someone in adding sex after they already said no? Many more people will say yes. Or like would you have sex with someone who is drunk? Many more people will say yes. So I think that like when we learn consent as like, uh, no means no kind of thing, it's not..

Danielle: 10:51 Clear enough.

Amanda: 10:52 Clear enough.

Danielle: 10:52 Like there are certain things that impair consent always.

Amanda: 10:57 And I think that it's frustrating because I don't think that it's necessarily a responsibility to like teach kids through fiction, but on this subject where we already have a culture that has very much been built up into a rape culture, putting this in the world is another brick to that rape culture doesn't come from one or two examples. It comes from tiny examples in hundreds of books and movies and TV shows, and I just don't feel good about recommending another piece of that it out there.

Danielle: 11:29 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 Stronger, Faster, and More Beautiful and dig a little deeper.

Ad: 11:49 Hey friends, here's a quick way that you can support us and our authors' pre-order our book choices through our affiliate links. We'll get a small kickback and pre-orders count towards an author's first week totals. Everybody wins. Next week we're going to discuss The Disasters by M. K., England. It tackles that age old question. What happens if you wash out of flight school and suddenly become an interplanetary fugitive? If you'd like to help us keep bringing you great content, pre- order through the link in our show notes. Happy reading!

Amanda: 12:31 Welcome back y'all, It's time for Things We Like a Latte. Danielle, what's your brew of choice this week?

Danielle: 12:35 Well, Amanda.

Amanda: 12:36 Well, Danielle.

Danielle: 12:37 This week I am really missing our producer Leila, as always and one of the things that we did in Pensacola was that we would go swing dancing and blues dancing and so I've been listening to a lot of what I call like Sassy swing, which is awesome ladies singing awesome songs that are swing jazz and blues and one of the artists that I am really digging right now is Caro Emerald. She's a Dutch artist and her sound is amazing and I'm just really loving her music and missing Leila.

Amanda: 13:17 She's the one who did "Liquid Lunch", right?

Danielle: 13:19 Yeah!

Amanda: 13:19 Yeah! Great song.

Danielle: 13:20 And "The Ghost of You", great song. How about you Amanda? What's your Thing You Like a Latte?

Amanda: 13:26 Well, I am liking A: That it's after Thanksgiving and so you have finally authorized me to sing Christmas music loudly and often throughout the house, but also I am really enjoying that we just put together our book tree and now we have this wonderful like five foot tree that is made a book. You can see the pictures on our Instagram and we have a couple of the processes on Instagram and twitter I think.

Danielle: 13:50 Yeah, and I also, you know, when we made our book tree last year, I did a very elaborate like how to make a book tree blog posts.

Amanda: 13:57 Yeah. There's a system you can't just go willy nilly into a book tree.

Danielle: 14:00 There's planning involved.

Amanda: 14:01 You'll have a book mound pile

Danielle: 14:04 Nerd. * laughter* a book shrub

Amanda: 14:04 I'm rying to think of like, a book bushel.

Danielle: 14:04 A book bush!

Amanda: 14:04 If you don't do right, you've got a book bush.

Danielle: 14:16 We're going to take a quick break and when we come back we'll return to our discussion on Stronger, Faster, and More Beautiful. The rest of the show will contain spoilers, so if you're leaving us here to keep in touch on Instagram and Twitter at YA Cafe Podcast, we'll be back.

Amanda: 14:46 Welcome back y'all to the YA Cafe. We're continuing our discussion on Stronger, Faster and More Beautiful by Arwen Elys Dayton. If you haven't read this yet, we want to warn you again that this segment will contain spoilers

Danielle: 14:56 And more rape because I'm going to talk about it right now.

Amanda: 15:00 Okay.

Danielle: 15:01 Well, I just wanted to circle back to what I think the author's intention was. I'm being optimistic, but I just wanted to account for it that this is what I believe was happening in her mind and there's basically a difference between your intentions as a creator and then how your work has received in the world and really only one of those things matters and it's the second one.

Amanda: 15:26 Yes, and I want to be super clear that I am not suggesting that Arwen Elys Dayton has this idea of like building up rape culture, I am critiquing only the work as it's presented. Not any of her opinions or philosophies or anything like that.

Danielle: 15:43 Right, and we couldn't talk to her about it, which is what we wanted to do, but what I wanted to say was that, you know, Jake has this flashback, but Jake basically enters the story as a slave who has been mechanically altered by the Russians. So he went to, sleep... cryosleep

Amanda: 16:08 He got froze!

Danielle: 16:10 He got froze! So, he had this condition and there wasn't a cure for it yet. And so he went to Estonia where it was legal to be cryogenically frozen until a cure is found and basically that was all good and well, until the Russians took over Estonia and they unfroze everybody and they mechanically altered them, not genetically altered them, mechanically altered them and made them into slaves. So, that's where we meet Jake in this narrative and he had no chance to consent to what was happening to his body and he suffered these things and I think that the point that the author was trying to make was like, oh, the abuser becomes the victim, blah, blah blah. It didn't work.

- Amanda: 17:01 I think that's a fair reading. I'm not sure that's where I go with it, but I think it is like a fair reading of what might have been the reasoning.
- Danielle: 17:10 And I mean, it made me think of Emily Skrutskie's *Hullmetal Girls* because in that book people are also altered without their consent or coerced in a way that takes consent away from them. But I think that that book keeps eyes on the survivors in a way that this book doesn't.
- Amanda: 17:30 I disagree. Are you talking about specifically like the survivors of sexual assault? Because I feel like all of these characters are victims of like this big genetic modification. The biggest one I think of specifically is the Dolphin boy characters.
- Danielle: 17:45 He is the anagrammar.
- Amanda: 17:46 He is so clearly a victim. Like he was genetically modified in the womb and then when it went poorly they turned them into like a dolphin creature and it's horrifying. Like I thought we'd peaked on body horror with *Hullmetal Girls*
- Danielle: 18:02 Yeah, I mean this definitely
- Amanda: 18:05 Like a good horrifying, sorry.
- Danielle: 18:06 Yeah, the thing that was horrific about that, I mean beyond the body modification was just like that his parents wanted him to be smart so he'd have a fighting chance. And then he became too smart and didn't have those social competencies. And his parents didn't want to be his parents anymore.
- Amanda: 18:30 It was real wicked.
- Danielle: 18:32 It was dark, and the other dark thing these are the middle two stories that we're talking about now in the six stories of the other dark thing was that the third perspective is the daughter of the religious leader and he is a fanatic against modification.

Amanda: 18:53 Ugh, I can't even think about this. I was sitting next to you and I was a little bit ahead of you and I could tell when you read this part because you just go Ahhh! *Laughter* It was really well written. It was so creepy, It was so dark, so good.

Danielle: 19:10 I think that that was such an important inclusion in this novel and it's one of the reasons why I liked this book. I really liked the consideration of what an ideological reaction might be.

Amanda: 19:25 Yeah, I did too. I think especially because it's the thread through all the stories is this reverend. And so you see like his rise to fanaticism twist into a different fanaticism. And I thought it was really interesting to see that journey for him. Um, I want to go back to talk about an earlier story because it's,

Danielle: 19:46 Yeah!

Amanda: 19:47 It was so great.

Danielle: 19:48 It was my favorite.

Amanda: 19:50 It was the other main character who did a really horrible thing, which was in the second story, uh, our main character has been...

Danielle: 19:58 Rescued by genetic genetic modification.

Amanda: 19:58 Rescued by genetic modification and all these medical advances and you know, she gets scorned by a former lover and pushes them in front of a bus! *Laughter*

Danielle: 20:11 And then he has to be genetically modified.

Amanda: 20:13 Oh, my God, it was such a great moment.

Danielle: 20:16 It surprised me.

Amanda: 20:17 I was very surprised. I thought it was so good and I really, I just loved it. I like reading when characters do terrible things, especially when it's clear that this is not the right choice. Like no one reads this and is like, man! that was really the moral choice to push in front of a bus.

Danielle: 20:34 Especially when the bad thing happens like later in the narrative because you've already gotten on the character side, right? So, you're like, you're in their head, you're on their side, and then they do a terrible thing then you are like, oh, would I do that terrible thing in that situation?

Amanda: 20:50 It was great and she was a great character and God that was just such a good story. But I loved all the stories. Like I really loved this book. I thought the end was just so horrifying. So the end is sort of like where all these modifications start to fall apart. *Laughter*

Danielle: 21:08 So grotesque! So, the idea of like the naturalists, like poisoning the corn, oh! it's like out of this world. And then like we have the prototypes who have never been genetically modified and there on a reservation and just the whole thing is horrific and I feel like that's exactly how it would go.

Amanda: 21:29 I think they did that in the Uglies Trilogies to where there's like this reservation of like normal humans. And I think it was better in this one because it had the uh, it had them as the perspective characters.

Danielle: 21:43 Yeah, so, one thing that I found particularly horrifying about this ending is that if you think about like all the reasons why somebody would choose to be genetically modified from health benefits, like not dying to cosmetic modifications. All of the people who underwent genetic modification, no matter what their reasons died.

Amanda: 22:07 Yeah.

Danielle: 22:08 I mean it wasn't just like smiting the wicked. It was just like it was all of them.

Amanda: 22:14 All of them. And even the naturalists were dying.

Danielle: 22:17 Yes! Uh, because, and this is like the amazing thing because doctor's got to the point where they made genetic modifications without even telling the parents things became so normal.

Amanda: 22:31 What got me with like the body horror, the was the part when they're trying to get to the authority, I don't know, whatever they're trying to go to the building and they're like climbing over like piles of bodies and it wasn't even that part that got me. It was when they walked into the building and she mentions we stopped to wipe the gore off our shoes. *laughter* Oh, it was so creepy, It was so good.

Danielle: 22:58 Yeah, I really like a lot of elements in this book. I thought it was extremely creative and extremely well written and like the best sort of sci-fi that considers our future as humanity

Amanda: 23:11 Agreed.

Danielle: 23:13 That's our show for today friends. You can find us on Instagram and Twitter at YA Cafe podcast. We'd love to hear from you and if you're enjoying the show, leave us a review. Happy reading! *Music*