

YA Café Podcast
Episode 42: *If I Was Your Girl*
24 January 2019

- 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 *If I Was Your Girl* by Meredith Russo. Grab a mug of your favorite beverage, friends, and let's talk books. *Music*
- Ad: 00:21 Have you tried the Radio Public 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 Radio Public.
- Amanda: 00:44 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 this book yet. I'm Amanda Thrasher.
- Danielle: 00:56 I'm Danielle Hall, an 8th and 9th grade English teacher, and I blog at teachnouvelle.com.
- Danielle: 00:56 Today we're discussing *If I Was Your Girl* by Meredith Russo. Amanda is a normal high school girl and for the first time she's given the chance to live like one. She's a transgender teen who moves back in with her estranged father after the bullying and attacks at her old school become too much. At her new school no one knows she used to look like a boy, she's just the pretty new girl. And it isn't long before she has a group of good friends, a boyfriend on the football team and something that looks like the life she's always wanted. Amanda's father still struggling with fear for this new daughter, he thought was the son and Amanda tries to come to terms with keeping a secret from her new friends.
- Danielle: 01:33 Alright, so this book was published in 2016. It won the Stonewall Book Award. It has won a bunch of other awards and basically has a lot of accolades. Amanda, what did you think of *If I Was Your Girl*?
- Amanda: 01:47 I think this book is, you know, I mean as is evidenced by the fact that it won a Stonewall It's a hugely important book. It's written by a transgender author about a transgender teen and unfortunately that's a main character that we don't have a lot of in YA. There's very occasionally transgender characters, but very few transgender point of view characters. We've been lucky enough to have a few on the podcast, like one of the main characters from *Blanca and Roja* was gender queer, but overall it's still not as common in the YA landscape as it really ought to be.

Danielle: 02:20 I agree, and at the end of this book, Meredith Russo includes an author Q & A, and I just wanted to read one of her responses to a question about representation. Meredith Russo says, "representation is how humans figure out who we are and what we want. Think of 1984 new speak for an example of why representation is important. The party believes that if they remove people's ability to articulate an idea, they also removed the idea itself. It's the same with representation for most people. If you're never told it's possible for you to do something or as is the case with subject minorities. If you're told over and over that can't do something, it becomes difficult to imagine doing it." And then she goes on and she says, "I want to see trans revolutionaries, trans astronauts, trans post-apocalyptic survivors, trans magicians, trans everything. Because the more we tell young trans people they can be, the more they will be." So, this book is really important as a book with a trans protagonist written by a trans woman. I mean, that's a really big deal.

Amanda: 03:23 And I think that for most of this book, that really was the story. Um, you know, it's Amanda, like dealing with being transgender and being the new student at the school. And then of course there's a boy, um...

Danielle: 03:35 Instalove.. *Singing*

Amanda: 03:35 I would not call it...

Danielle: 03:38 He was literally the first guy she saw at school.

Amanda: 03:41 Yeah, but you know, it was sweet. It was built. He's a nice guy.

Danielle: 03:47 I didn't say he wasn't, I was just saying.

Amanda: 03:49 I didn't think it was intsalove. I thought it was like a sweet little high school romance, you know?

Danielle: 03:54 Yeah, I mean, it's a contemporary high school romance. It was exactly what it set out to be. Um, I thought every inch of this book was predictable, but that's okay.

Amanda: 04:03 Yeah, I think that, you know, we've talked some about how a big part of the importance of representation, kind of what she touched on, what that quote is, that the more books you have, the less every book has to be everything for every person, you know what I mean. So it's like this does not have to be the book for all transgender people, like because a lot of transgender people are not going to be interested in like this straight romance, you know, so I think it's great for what it is. I think that we just need a lot more books with trans characters so that it's not like this is not the total representation of the transgender experience.

Danielle: 04:40 Right. And I do want to talk more in the spoiler section about that, but let's talk about the novel itself. So, Amanda gets this gaggle of friends, Layla, Anna and Chloe.

Amanda: 04:52 I really liked them. I thought they were fun. I thought they were like the right amount of gregarious for high school girls you know.

Danielle: 05:00 I agree. And one of the moments that I really liked, I'm sorry, I can't even remember what character was, I guess it was Layla when Amanda at Layla in gym class and they're about to run for the class period. And all Amanda has is a regular bra and Layla is like, "you can't run in that. You're going to be sore." And like Amanda doesn't know.

Amanda: 05:23 Yeah.

Danielle: 05:24 And Layla is just like, "oh honey, you live with your father. And he just hasn't told you anything. *Laughter*

Amanda: 05:30 Bless your heart. *Laughter*

Danielle: 05:32 I love that. It was just so like normal and chill and like good friend material there.

Amanda: 05:38 I also thought another really good friend moment was when she's talking to Anna, Layla and Chloe, and I can't remember who she's talking to here, but she mentioned like, yeah, "I've made friends with Bee." And she's like, "Oh, you're friends with Bee?" And then she's like, "oh my God. No!

I didn't say that. Like be friends with whoever you want to." *Laughter* I really that moment because I liked the sudden self awareness of like, I'm not going to be one of those mean girls who's like...
Laughter

Danielle: 06:02 Your friends with Bee? *Laughter*

Amanda: 06:05 Gross! *Laughter* Yeah, I thought it was nice. I liked their characterization and friendship.

Danielle: 06:09 Me too. Another thing I really liked about this book. Um, so you know, (In a masculine voice) she and Grant start dating and da da da .

Amanda: 06:17 Is that your official dating voice?

Danielle: 06:18 (In a masculine voice) That's my official dating voice. This is what it sounds like when a 30 year old talks about dating. *Laughter*

Amanda: 06:23 (In a masculine voice) Kids today and their Promposals *Laughter*

Danielle: 06:29 Anyway, so he takes her and this is like, I don't know, this totally happened at my high school. It's totally real thing. He takes her mudding. Have you ever been mudding?

Amanda: 06:39 I haven't actually, have you?

Danielle: 06:41 Yeah, and so it's like bumpy and dirty and like lawless (In a masculine voice) kids these days and their lawlessness.

Amanda: 06:50 You're getting really cranktankerous here today. *Laughter* I didn't know this was inside you
*Laughter

Danielle: 06:55 No, but I mean like lawless in the sense of being a third place where kids can like open up and be themselves and you're driving over mud in a truck and it's fine or whatever. And Amanda really enjoys herself and she doesn't think she would and I just love that and she has this sweet little quote Amanda says, "how much of life was like that? Just waiting for me to come and give it a chance." And it was like her waiting for life to begin song. I was expecting you to sing...

Amanda: 07:25 Yeah, we can't copyright Disney's scary.

Danielle: 07:27 Oh, that's right. Disney's scary. So, the other thing I wanted to talk about in the non-spoiler section when she meets Bee who is this like...

Amanda: 07:37 Tortured art style outsider.

Danielle: 07:40 Yeah.

Amanda: 07:42 Cool kid.

Danielle: 07:43 Openly queer...

Amanda: 07:43 She identifies as bisexual.

Danielle: 07:46 The first time this skip class or something, which is like literally all they can do because art class has been de-funded or something. And so they like go hang out behind school and Bee as like, you know, they've known each other for five minutes and Bee is like "I like you, let's play the secrets game" or the honesty game where it's like truth or dare but just truth. And this made me really uncomfortable that it was like such a short time of knowing each other and be like wanting to trade secrets.

Amanda: 08:19 I didn't feel as uncomfortable with that as you. But I also don't like secrets. Like I don't like having secrets. I will keep secrets for people. But like I don't like keeping secrets myself. Like I don't

like keeping my stuff secret. I'm just like, well am I just flop it all out here? *Laughter* So, like I don't know, I didn't, I didn't feel like such a negative reaction to it the way you did.

Danielle: 08:40 I mean, so the thing that I felt really negatively about was the idea that secrets were currency and we bring them together and that, you know, they had to share five secrets of growing intensity and importance and that's what they owed each other, even though they'd known each other for like 10 minutes.

Amanda: 08:58 I think it was later than that though, wasn't it like after a few days of skipping class together or I'm not sure time kind of skipped around in this book.

Danielle: 09:05 But also like a few days of skipping class together. It's still not like, let me tell you my deepest, darkest secret.

Amanda: 09:11 Sure because then it's like third date material for me. *Laughter* I mean I can see how the exchange of it is currency in the way that you mentioned is odd. Instead of just like, well, here's all my garbage about all your garbage, you know? Um, so I can see how that phrasing of things was maybe more weird than just like normal friends oversharing too early. *Laughter*

Danielle: 09:46 Yeah, it put it into like a transnational level that didn't feel like friendship to me. But who knows.

Amanda: 09:46 Who knows?

Danielle: 09:47 There are so many friends in the world.

Danielle: 09:49 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 If I Was Your Girl and dig a little deeper. *Music*

Ad: 10:08 Hey friends, are you sitting there thinking this podcast is awwwwweeesome'? I know me too. Well here's how to support us and our authors order our book choices through our affiliate links. We'll get a small kickback and preorders count towards an author's first week totals. Everyone wins!

Next week we'll be discussing *Death Prefers Blondes* by Caleb Roehrig. It's about a heist team made up of teenage drag queens and it's a romp. If you'd like to help us keep bringing you great content. Order through the link in our show notes. Happy reading! *Music*

Amanda: 10:49 Welcome back y'all. It's time for things. Things We Like a Latte! Danielle, what's your brew of choice this week?

Danielle: 10:53 So, this is old news, but also new news because we didn't know for the space of 24 hours whether it would come back or not, but I love Brooklyn Nine-Nine.

Amanda: 11:05 Ba-da-ba-ba-ba *Singing*

Danielle: 11:05 And it's back.

Amanda: 11:07 Ba-da-ba-ba-ba *Singing* *Laughing*

Danielle: 11:07 This show makes me so happy. When I was younger, I really liked funny cop shows and murder shows like, you know, *Psych* and *Monk* and all that. But, a lot of those shows relied on cops bending the Fourth Amendment rules of search and seizure. And I realized as I got older that that is hugely problematic and totally infringing on people's rights. What I love about Brooklyn Nine-Nine, is not only is it hilarious, the cops actually follow the rules and when they don't follow the rules they get in trouble. So, I love Brooklyn Nine-Nine. It's really funny, it has a hugely diverse cast in like every sense of the word, personality, sexuality, relationship with their job. I mean it's just funny. How about you Amanda? Things We Like a Latte?

Amanda: 12:09 So as we're recording this podcast, we are staring down the barrel of about a month of a government shut down, which means that I as a Coast Guard member, I'm not getting paid.

Danielle: 12:19 Volunteering *Singing* *Laughter*

Amanda: 12:20 Yep. So I'm really enjoying my time volunteering. That's not what I like. What I do like a lot is how much the community here has rallied around the Coast Guards. So, we've been living in Astoria

for a few months and there's a big Coast Guard presence in the town and National Parks presence in the town and the way that folks here have just rallied around us has been really unbelievable. Like they've opened up pop up food pantries for Coast Guard members like restaurants have had free or discounted food for federal employees and their families. It's just been really wonderful and while it's very, very difficult to be dealing with the struggle of having a lot of junior members who are trying their best to do their jobs and to focus on saving people and doing what we are in the Coast Guard to do without getting paid. It's been really, really good to see how the community has really stepped up. Uh, the community of Astoria, uh, is just unbelievable. I know a lot of local communities are stepping up in very similar ways. If you do want to help Coast Guard members who are affected by this shutdown, there's a really wonderful program called Coast Guard Mutual Assistance and this is a chance for Coast Guard members and civilian employees of the Coast Guard to apply for zero interest loans. And for a lot of people it's going to be their only source of income this month, um, but it is a limited budget and they're not going to be able to reach everything. So if you're looking for ways to help folks who are affected by the shutdown, other federal employees may have similar programs, but CGMA is a really good program and I would encourage you to help out because it doesn't look like things are gonna change anytime in the immediate future. And we're going to need a lot of help to get people through this.

Danielle: 14:02 So absolutely.

Danielle: 14:03 We're going to take a quick break and when we come back we'll return to our discussion on if I was your girl. The rest of the show will contain spoilers. So if you let us hear, keep in touch and Instagram and Twitter @yacafepodcast. We'll be back. *Music*

Amanda: 14:34 Welcome back to the YA Cafe. We're continuing our discussion on If I Was Your Girl by Meredith Russo, if you haven't read this yet, we want to warn you again that this segment will contain spoilers.

Danielle: 14:44 Spoilers! *Singing*

Danielle: 14:44 And promposals.

Amanda: 14:46 Ugh! It doesn't make me feel like a grumpy old lady, the promposal thing.

Danielle: 14:51 Oh, my God. *Laughter*

Amanda: 14:51 But it was really cute and really sweet and like, I'm really glad that Amanda had that experience, etc. It was nerdy, It was sweet.

Danielle: 15:01 Oh! I wanted to say because when you came back and you were like, If I Were Your Girl instead of If I Was Your Girl , I wanted to nerd out and tell you that Meredith Russo is completely aware of the improper use of the subjunctive in this title.

Amanda: 15:15 Well, yeah, it's a song title for a song lyric.

Danielle: 15:18 Yes. So it comes from a Janet Jackson song and she feels that it also kind of places it in this rural setting and I think that that's really cool to be aware of that. Also, I mean it seems like she chose the title, which doesn't always happen, so yay for her. Great job Meredith Russo.

Amanda: 15:38 Yeah.

Danielle: 15:39 Also while we're here, there is a lovely trans model on the cover, so that is cool.

Amanda: 15:45 Yeah, I think that's really great, especially given that there have been so many cover debacle in history, which we can talk about more at another time, but it's nice that she was able to say I want a trans model on the cover and they did that and I think it really added to the whole feeling of like this book is going to be like created by a trans person for trans people. um, whether or not everything in the story was that way. Like it's good that at least like in the development and all those sorts of things that they made that choice.

Danielle: 16:16 Right. We kind of talked about this earlier and it made me think of something that I was told as a younger teacher. Someone said to me, "you do not have to reach every student. You only have to reach some students" and between all of us as a school, you know, ideally, obviously "we will reach all of the students" and that is like how book should be, right? Like not every book is for every person, I don't love contemporary high school romances, but like between all of the books, there should be representation that reaches every kid. And one of the things that I wanted to talk about that Meredith Russo is really aware of is that she chose in her writing to write Amanda's experience so that it did not have many of the obstacles that trans teens often face. One of the things two, of the

things really they go hand in hand in this book, um, when we talk about Amanda passing at her new school..

Amanda: 17:18 quote unquote passing to be clear, not like transgender people have to look all female or all male or whatever. Passing is like a general term for it, but it's not when we say it, we don't mean to positively or negatively.

Danielle: 17:31 Also I am directly quoting Meredith Russo here from her author's note. But she talks about Amanda's ability to pass. Um, Amanda was able to start hormone therapy and get bottom surgery very young in a way that is not practical, accessible or affordable for all transgender teens. So this means that Amanda has the ability to have this secret in a way that not all teens would even have that option. She also chooses to have Amanda be straight and very feminine. And I thought that that was an interesting choice. You know, she says that this book is for trans readers, but she also made a lot of choices that make this book, quote unquote palatable and quote unquote commercial to cis readers.

Amanda: 18:29 Yeah. She mentioned specifically things like, wanting to make sure that people didn't think that like maybe Grant was gay because of his attraction to Amanda and things like that. And as a cisgender person, I cannot imagine like the pressure of writing a trans character and you want it to be for your trans audience, but you also know that like to sell a book, cisgender people have to read it, right?

Danielle: 18:52 Right. That's just math.

Amanda: 18:55 It's just math. *Laughter* So I think that she has written a really beautiful book and a really wonderful book and a really important book. And in all of our discussions, it's more just frustration that there aren't more stories being told by trans authors and trans characters. And I've really, I'm so looking forward to more books by Meredith Russo's, especially these space captains and astronauts.

Danielle: 19:16 Yes. So, I wanted to read she wrote something else. So one of the questions that you asked me, Amanda, kind of like just in spit-balling is like why did she write this book? And I truly believe that she wrote this book so that she would have initial commercial success that would allow her to tell more ambitious stories in the future. And here is a quote from her. "I wanted to write a trans character because I'm a trans woman and I've spent my whole life very conscious that the only time I ever heard stories about people like me, they were being told by cis people to cis people. I really can't understate how damaging that lack of decent representation is when you're a kid and when you're trying to figure out how you fit in the world around you. And I wanted my book to be part of the solution. I grew up on Sci-Fi and fantasy and I've got a lot of ideas for very high concept story is about

magic and transhumanism involving trans characters, but it also sort of felt like we're not there yet. Huge numbers of people are only barely aware of what a trans person is and even then their knowledge is probably 90 percent hurtful, inaccurate stereotypes to these people. All trans stories are effectively Sci-Fi, you know."

Danielle: 20:27 And I went, oh, I get it. And her trans humanists story that may be four or five books down the road, but I am excited that she's going to be able to write it.

Amanda: 20:38 Yeah, me too. I mean, especially considering when she's talking about, you know, most of the stories about trans people have been by cis people, for cis people. The biggest that really reminds me of is Luna, which came out a few years before *If I Was Your Girl*. It's extensively about the transgender character, but it's from the point of view of her cisgender sister who's like struggling with the loss of her brother and blah blah blah. And I'm like, this is not her story so from that angle, *If I Was Your Girl* is wonderful to have in the world.

Danielle: 21:07 For sure and I'm definitely excited to have more books like it and I do. I want to get back and talk about the book itself. So we had a couple more things we wanted to talk about.

Amanda: 21:19 Yeah, let's talk about Bee.

Danielle: 21:21 So Bee, as you may remember, is her artsy, cranky friend. The only other out queer person in the story. The only out queer person in the novel. And then at the end, you know, she really likes Amanda and she wants Amanda to date her, but Amanda is straight and Amanda turns who down and so Bee outs her everyone at prom.

Amanda: 21:48 Her and Chloe.

Danielle: 21:49 Ahhhhhhh!

Amanda: 21:53 Yeah. I struggled with that a bit. I mean I understand like I liked the character of Bee being like this prickly person, but I felt like having her suddenly turn into like this woman's scorn after she was initially very quick to accept Amanda and be like, okay, you're trans, that's fun, whatever, like you do you. So I was very frustrated that like, just because Amanda didn't want to date her, all of a sudden Bee turned into this...

Danielle: 22:23 Angry lesbian.

Amanda: 22:25 Angry lesbian.

Danielle: 22:26 Not lesbian she's bisexual. But the angry lesbian stereotype.

Amanda: 22:30 Yes.

Danielle: 22:31 And that is what I felt when I read this. I went, oh great. The girl who likes girls is angry. Great I'm angry about that.

Amanda: 22:40 What a stereotype you are. *Laughter*

Amanda: 22:43 Yeah. It bothered me that Bee was the one who added her for sure.

Danielle: 22:48 We wanted to talk about Amanda's relationship with her parents.

Amanda: 22:52 I was like, we don't want to talk about my relationship with my parents. *Laughter*

Danielle: 22:57 So, in the novel, Amanda is back with her estranged father who couldn't handle that. She was a girl, I don't remember, but he was a dirt bag and left.

Amanda: 23:10 Got better. I guess..?

Danielle: 23:11 He got better.

Amanda: 23:13 I mean a little. Like he is learning, he is learning.

Danielle: 23:20 Yeah, but her mom is great.

Amanda: 23:22 Her mom is great. I really loved the scene where Amanda spots her mother crying over pictures of Amanda as a small boy looking child.

Danielle: 23:34 Andrew

Amanda: 23:35 Andrew, and her mother is just sobbing and she's like, "why are you crying?" And her mother says, "I miss him" talking about Andrew, which was Amanda's name before she transitioned. And I really loved this because her mother went on to describe but I cried about losing a baby when you turn to and I cried about losing a toddler when you started kindergarten and like she wasn't necessarily mourning that Amanda was transgender. She was just mourning that kids grow up and the passage of time, etc. And I thought that was a really sweet moment. I really liked that.

Danielle: 24:08 I really liked that too. And I liked how her mom was religious and Amanda was religious and her mom's friends from church really turned on her when this happened and she lost a lot of her family connections, but her loyalty to her daughter was stronger and yet they both still clung to their spirituality. Like Amanda goes to church in this book and has this very spiritual experience even though she's at a fundamentalist church that like if they knew would not accept her.

Amanda: 24:44 Right.

Danielle: 24:45 And I love that because religion can be very challenging for queer folx once they're out. However, comma, it's very important to a lot of people.

Amanda: 24:58 I liked the portrayal of her friend Anna after she was outed at the end, her friends stuck by her which was great and Grant was kind of a fart noise like whatever boys. But her friends stuck by her even Anna who is the more religious one. And she was like, well, I mean I think that it's wrong, but like a lot of things are wrong so I'm not going to hold this any higher than others. Which I really

loved that because I'm like, oh, Anna is going to be like a great radical and a few years *Laughter* because that's exactly like a thing that I thought when I was younger. I was like, well I think that it's wrong, but I think that like poverty is more wrong, you know? **Laughter* I really liked that in her.

Danielle: 25:40 I really liked her friends and you know, so Betsy said that some books are like a warm cup of tea. This book isn't quite a warm cup of tea, but it's like pretty warm. There is a happy ending.

Amanda: 25:56 It's like a handhold.

Danielle: 25:59 Yeah, it's sweet. It has a sweet ending.

Amanda: 26:02 It's like a non clammy hand hold. *Laughter* An important delineation in the handhold.

Danielle: 26:09 Is that our in depth analysis?

Amanda: 26:11 That's my in depth analysis. *Laughter*

Danielle: 26:16 Alright. Shall we wrap up?

Amanda: 26:18 I think we just did.

Danielle: 26:19 That's our show for today. Friends. You can find us on Instagram and twitter @yacafepodcast. We'd love to hear from you and if you're enjoying this show, leave us a review. Happy reading!