

YA Café Podcast
Episode 48: *Girls With Sharp Sticks*
21 March 2019

Danielle Hall: 00:00 Welcome to the YA Café, where we share conversations about books for teachers, readers and caffeine addicts everywhere. On today's episode we'll be talking about *Girls With Sharp Sticks* by Suzanne Young. Grab a mug of your favorite beverage friends, and let's talk books.

Amanda Thrasher: 00:14 Welcome y'all as always our first segment we'll 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 Hall: 00:28 I'm Danielle Hall and eighth and ninth grade English teacher and I blog at teachnouvelle.com and our guest today is YA suspense writer and friend of the podcast Amanda K Morgan. Hi Mandy!

Amanda Morgan: 00:40 Hi, thanks so much for having me.

Danielle Hall: 00:42 Thank you for joining us again.

Amanda Morgan: 00:44 Of course you know I'm always more than happy to be part of a podcast. It's an honor.

Amanda Thrasher: 00:49 An honor, oh my god, what an accolade. *laughter*

Amanda Morgan: 00:50 It is, you guys are fabulous. I was so excited to receive an early copy of this. I have been friends with Suzanne for a really long time and really loved this book. So it is also an honor for me to be able to discuss my friend's book with you.

Amanda Thrasher: 01:10 It's great I mean, you guys have been friends for a long time and as soon as we saw this book was coming out it was like we should talk about this with Mandy.

Amanda Morgan: 01:17 Yes.

Danielle Hall: 01:19 Alright let's do it.

Amanda Thrasher: 01:20 So our book this week is *Girls With Sharp Sticks* by Suzanne Young. Philomena is the perfect student at a school that makes perfect girls. Behind her school's gated walls girls are molded to become perfect wives for powerful men. Girls who are beautiful to look at and won't ask too many questions. They're constantly told the school has their very best interest at heart with important financiers invested in each girl's future. Every girl's emotion and reaction is carefully tamped down till it isn't. On one of their rare trips to the outside world Philomena encounters a civilian who is horrified of the way they're treated and that's when the girls realize there are something very very wrong at Innovations Academy.

Amanda Thrasher: 01:59 So Danielle what did you think of this book?

Danielle Hall: 02:02 I really liked this book. I liked the pacing, I liked the characters. Because I've read Suzanne's books before I knew that there was gonna be suspense and a thrill and probably a twist. I had no idea what it would be but like that's how she is as a writer. So, I was excited and ready to see what it would be.

Danielle Hall: 02:26 How about you Mandy what did you think?

Amanda Morgan: 02:28 I loved it. I thought it was really interesting, it's a great look at feminism without being heavy handed and it's incredibly different that everything else on the market right now.

Amanda Thrasher: 02:41 You mentioned some about like the accessibility of the feminism but I thought the whole book was like very accessibly written.

Amanda Morgan: 02:49 Yes.

Amanda Thrasher: 02:49 So Mandy and Danielle for those of y'all who don't know are working on a project for readers to are, of like a YA age but not up to like to a YA reading level necessarily and I feel like this book will fit into that very well. Like, it's not as super challenging reading level and it's very accessible as far as it's themes and it's concepts, while still being a subject matter that's gonna be interesting to YA readers. It's gonna be relevant to their interests and like what they're dealing with on a day to

day. So I thought that, especially from that aspect it was really great because of the way that these girls are raised as not being super highly well read or educated beyond what's required for a household. So through that story telling it translates to being like very easy to read, I think.

Danielle Hall: 03:39 I agree. I thought it was very easy to read and very, like I already said well paced and, and what I really mean by that is like I couldn't put it down. There were no slow parts for me.

Amanda Thrasher: 03:49 Yeah, I agree. Super well paced. Like it parses out like the slow burn really well, while still completely carrying you along, I thought.

Amanda Morgan: 03:58 Absolutely. You have these girls to on the surface seem very naïve and are very naïve but there's always this feeling of something lurking just underneath the surface and I feel like that's what Suzanne is really good at.

Amanda Thrasher: 04:12 Yeah.

Danielle Hall: 04:13 Yeah, I really liked the girls too. So we had Mena who was our main character. We had Sydney her best friend. Lots of other girls come in and out and we'll talk about some of them. Then we have Lennon Rose who is like effervescent and optimistic and slightly fragile but all the girls feel really protective of her. I think this cast was really interesting and the girls were kind of like codependent because they were in this closed system of the school. They didn't have other people to like have friendships with or like talk to, so they really relied on each other.

Amanda Morgan: 04:53 I really did love their relationships between all of the female characters. This book is really about female friendships and I don't think that's too much of a spoiler but it's wonderful to see women supporting each other in a book, and this entire story is a wonderful example of that.

Danielle Hall: 05:13 As Amanda said they go on this field trip and Mena meets a civilian ...

Amanda Thrasher: 05:18 The boy

Danielle Hall: 05:18 The boy

Amanda Morgan: 05:21 Jackson.

Danielle Hall: 05:22 He's the one that's like, "Your school's a little weird."

Amanda Thrasher: 05:26 Yeah, I uh, at first I was like, "Oh my god please don't let this be like Jackson's gonna come and like show them all how they should be treated like blah blah blah", but it wasn't. It was just like Jackson happened to be the person who saw it and was like, "Ummm that's not normal", like so I feel like it was really well done. Because it still felt very much like it was Philomena and like the girls awakening into like how bizarre and wrong their world was. It was just this once outside person who saw it, who was like uhhh that's not how things ought to be and you know, he happened to be like a really cute boy who bought her candy.

Danielle Hall: 06:08 So in this school they are surrounded by men. They have male teachers that talk down to them, they have the head master who decides what each girl should wear, what her hair is gonna look like and how her makeups gonna be. But we have a woman, Leandra and I wanted to talk about Leandra pretty upfront here because it is clear from the beginning that Leandra is complicit in the system. Because she is part of like regulating what these girls eat and how they act and how they look.

Amanda Thrasher: 06:41 Yeah, at the beginning when we see her she's very much the Serena Joy figure from Handmaids Tale.

Danielle Hall: 06:45 Right? Totally agree.

Amanda Thrasher: 06:47 Yeah. I really like her for reasons we can discuss in the second half, but it's a really well rounded character and I think that's so amazing because a lot of times the characters in this novel are more than they seem, and I think that's so much fun that we discover so much about every one these characters as the book progresses.

Danielle Hall: 07:10 And I think it's important when we're having a conversation about oppression to have someone who is complicit in that system.

Amanda Morgan: 07:18 That's a really good point.

Danielle Hall: 07:20 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 Girls With Sharp Sticks and dig a little deeper.

New Speaker: 07:28 *musical interlude*

Danielle Hall: 07:28 Hey friends are you looking for an easy way to support this podcast? Order our book choices through the affiliate link in our show notes. You'll be supporting our authors and making sure we get a small kick back to keep our show going. Next week we'll discuss Internment by Samira Ahmed. It's set in a horrifying near future, but way too close to reality to be tagged as dystopian. If you'd like to help us keep bringing you great content, order through the link in our show notes. Happy reading.

Amanda Thrasher: 08:16 Welcome back ya'll it's time for Things We Like a Latte. Danielle, what's your brew of choice this week?

Danielle Hall: 08:20 Well Amanda.

Amanda Thrasher: 08:22 Well Danielle.

Danielle Hall: 08:24 *laughter* So I know this is totally out of the norm here but first I wanna talk about a Thing I Don't Like a Latte.

Amanda Thrasher: 08:32 Oh my god!

Danielle Hall: 08:34 Netflix is dropping One Day at a time. Boooooooo!

Amanda Thrasher: 08:37 Boooo!

Danielle Hall: 08:38 Netflix says it wants to bring more stories with diverse characters but like, *One Day at a Time* is awesome. Just keep doing that, basically everybody wants that to continue and Netflix should honor the show it's built and the following that, that show has. Anyway, a *Thing I Like a Latte* is *Shout* which is Laurie Halse Anderson's memoir in free verse. Twenty years ago she published *Speak* and so now she has *Shout*, which is her memoir about surviving rape, about growing up and finding her voice and it is really great. The whole thing kind of reminds me of this Emily Dickinson quote which is "Tell the truth but tell it slant." Anytime we tell a story through poetry we're already kind of infusing it with a little bit of lying. Poetry is a little bit of lying in it's floweriness. We don't need to go like full English teacher here but this is a great book, everybody should read *Shout* by Laurie Halse Anderson. How about you Mandy? What's your *Thing You Like a Latte*?

Amanda Morgan: 09:56 My thing I like a latte is *Spinning Silver* by Naomie Novik. It is a loose retelling of *Rumpelstiltskin* and it is amazing. The writing is so divine and I one hundred percent recommend it.

Danielle Hall: 10:11 I saw that on your Goodreads. I added it to my 'want to read.'

Amanda Morgan: 10:15 Oh, good. Yes, I would reread it right now. That's how good it is.

Danielle Hall: 10:19 Right now, like stop recording.

Amanda Morgan: 10:21 Right now.

Danielle Hall: 10:21 Just go read it.

Amanda Morgan: 10:22 I gotta go, excuse me please. *laughter* Amanda what is your *Thing You Like a Latte*?

Amanda Thrasher: 10:31 So my thing I like a latte is an outstanding book called *The Fifth Season* by N.K. Jemisin. People who love fantasy and are really deep into fantasy have probably already read this whole series. It won the Hugo three years in a row, each of the books won the Hugo, in this trilogy and it is so good. It is an incredibly rich, well written world and the magic and the mythology behind it is just really stupendous. That's the *Fifth Season* by N.K. Jemisin.

Amanda Morgan: 11:01 It sounds awesome.

Danielle Hall: 11:02 I got you that book for Christmas.

Amanda Thrasher: 11:04 You did and it was a great choice.

Danielle Hall: 11:08 We're going to take a quick break. When we come back, we'll return to our discussion on *Girls with Sharp Sticks*. 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!

New Speaker: 11:21 *musical interlude*

Amanda Thrasher: 11:39 Welcome back ya'll to the YA Café. We're continuing our discussion on *Girls with Sharp Sticks* by Suzanne Young. If you haven't read this yet we want to warn you again that this segment will contain spoilers.

Danielle Hall: 11:48 Spoilers! And vitamins.

Amanda Thrasher: 11:52 Vitamins is not nearly as interesting as pirates.

Danielle Hall: 11:55 I know, but ...

Amanda Thrasher: 11:58 That's what you think. *laughter*

Amanda Thrasher: 11:58 But then.

Danielle Hall: 12:00 But then. Okay so, Suzanne has this thing with pills and pills are always something to be super skeptical of so I as soon as I saw vitamins I was like "Ya'll shouldn't be taking those vitamins."

Amanda Thrasher: 12:14 Don't take the vitamins.

Amanda Morgan: 12:14 Yeah, it's kinda of iconic if you've read The Program and then you read this you're like I can see some things that tie this together here but ...

Amanda Thrasher: 12:24 Oh yeah, clear mind control.

Amanda Morgan: 12:25 Yes, yes absolutely.

Danielle Hall: 12:28 So we knew it was mind control, like probably, I mean for me it was definitely like the first time that the dude gave her vitamins I was like "mmm".

Amanda Thrasher: 12:38 I mean, nobody's taking vitamin B in Suzanne Young book, like we all know this coming in. *laughter*

Amanda Morgan: 12:42 Yeah, its gonna be dark, it's gonna be dark and I love that because you know you might find it so boring that somebody's taking their you know Osteo Bi-Flex but that's not it here. *laughter* Not sponsored. *laughter*

Danielle Hall: 13:01 So we have that, and then we have Impulse Control Therapy.

Amanda Thrasher: 13:07 So when we follow Philomena into her Impulse Control Therapy for the first time and it's basically a lobotomy ...

Danielle Hall: 13:14 Oh my god

Amanda Thrasher: 13:14 I was like "oh my god"

Amanda Morgan: 13:18 An incredibly painful one as well, which ...

Danielle Hall: 13:21 But it's okay, the vitamins will help her forget. Unless she stops taking them.

Amanda Thrasher: 13:28 Yeah, I thought the lobotomy thing was a great detail because A. It's creepy as crap like it is a really gut wrenching scene to read.

Danielle Hall: 13:39 Oh yeah.

Amanda Thrasher: 13:39 But also because this book clearly has like, its feminist agenda I'm so here for it, and lobotomies were a thing that was used to control women for a very long time. So it wasn't, not exactly a lobotomy like it behind the eye, it's like a ice pick situation, it's terrible, but like it definitely evokes that and I feel like it was super intentional you know, like this means of controlling hysterical women.

Danielle Hall: 14:07 Hysterical women, exactly what I was thinking.

Amanda Thrasher: 14:09 Digging into their brains.

Danielle Hall: 14:10 like ...

Amanda Thrasher: 14:10 Yeah.

Danielle Hall: 14:11 ... controlling the emotional outburst.

Amanda Thrasher: 14:13 Yeah.

Danielle Hall: 14:15 And, you know Mandy, the book that you mentioned in the end of year episode A Madness so Discreet Is basically that, was when women were like locked away for being too emotional or too radical or just displeasing to their husbands.

Amanda Morgan: 14:31 Exactly, there are a lot of parallels and obviously this takes place in the not so distant future or maybe you could even say a slightly alternate universe but it is very easy to draw parallels with our real world today as well.

Amanda Thrasher: 14:48 Yeah, looking at you "Girl Wash You Face."

Danielle Hall: 14:53 So one of the things that happens to start the rest of the action is that the girls find a book of poetry called The Sharpest Thorns. So the title of the book by Suzanne Young Girls with Sharp Sticks comes from one of the poems in the book, in the book, right? It's very confusing but there's a poem and I just wanted to read an excerpt of poetry so that my wife who loves poetry could hear some.

Amanda Thrasher: 15:20 I don't know why you do this to me.

Amanda Morgan: 15:23 It's true love.

Danielle Hall: 15:25 So this is just an excerpt but you really, you really get a sense of why they're not supposed to have this book of poems. "The little girls attended school where the rules had changed. The girls were taught untruths, ignorance the only subject. When math was pushed aside for myth, the little girls adapted. They gathered sticks to count them learning their own math, and then, they sharpened their sticks." And that is like the thing that drives them to begin their resistance, is like this book of rebellious, I don't wanna say propaganda, but like it's a call to action. It is a call to rebellion.

Amanda Morgan: 16:05 It is a call to action but I also think it's validation and it's a reminder to these girls that they're not alone. All these feelings that they've been having and all these questions that they have

other girls have had these same questions and they've been looking for the same answers. So it's a reminder to them that regardless of what these men are telling you something is wrong.

Danielle Hall: 16:28 Yes and one of the things you wanted to talk about Mandy with Lennon Rose is that even in the way that I described her, we can see that she is like positioned to be somewhat vulnerable, like she ends up being very fierce.

Amanda Morgan: 16:44 Yes and I really love that because you have these girls who are supposed to be and I'm saying that very carefully, very similar to each other and yet they still have such distinct personalities, and it's ultimately different expressions of feminism so you have this very delicate character who ends up being incredibly strong. You have characters who are taught not to question and they do, and it just, I think it's great to remind people that there are many different faces to feminism.

Danielle Hall: 17:17 Right. And so were you surprised when Lenon Rose disappeared?

Amanda Morgan: 17:21 Yes I was surprised and I think her character developments, even though she's off page is some of the most refreshing and surprising in the book.

Danielle Hall: 17:32 Yeah I agree with you Mandy. I wasn't surprised because as soon as I met her I went "oh she's the Primm, she's the ..." I can't even say other people because then you know, if you go and read those books but we have read books the YA Café podcast that have characters like this. I'm like "Well, she's gotta go, she's a goner. " *laughter* and that is a really important part of the book because that is what Mena knows that she is like not going to forget, like she is motivated to find Lennon Rose. Then ...

Amanda Morgan: 18:08 Dun dun duun.

Amanda Thrasher: 18:09 They're robots.

Amanda Morgan: 18:11 Are they robots?

Amanda Thrasher: 18:13 Okay

Danielle Hall: 18:13 They're cyborgs

Amanda Thrasher: 18:14 They are artificially created. They have like, organic matter but they are created by artificial intelligence. Right?

Danielle Hall: 18:24 No they're not created by artificial intelligence. They're created by humans

Amanda Thrasher: 18:30 Well, they are artificial intelligence-d

Danielle Hall: 18:31 Yes.

Amanda Thrasher: 18:31 Or, they're artificially intelligenced.

Danielle Hall: 18:32 Yes.

Amanda Thrasher: 18:34 Man, we gotta work on English. *laughter*

Danielle Hall: 18:37 They have some parts that are like, I mean okay, they look human, they have synthetic human parts but when she was getting lobotomized the thing that was really happening to her was that the doctor guy was fidgeting around with her circuitry.

Amanda Thrasher: 18:55 Yeah.

Amanda Morgan: 18:55 I thought that was really interesting going into that because the way they described that I feel like you kind of knew but you weren't, you didn't fully understand what was going on.

Amanda Thrasher: 19:06 I didn't get it and I normally pick up stuff like this up, I was just like "Okay that totally makes sense and I'm ashamed of myself for not seeing it coming." *laughter* There's so many clues all along and I just totally missed em.

Danielle Hall: 19:18 I definitely did get it and there's one reason. At some point I read the comps that this was Handmaids Tale meets Westworld and I haven't even seen Westworld but I know that there are like cyborgs and robots and stuff. So, I'm like "well, they must be robots."

Amanda Thrasher: 19:37 Yeah, that's a bummer. I definitely would've been spoiled if I had seen that too. Like "oh, okay" but I didn't hear that so I was just derping along. *laughter*

Amanda Morgan: 19:46 It is a really good comp though, like when you think about it, it's absolutely perfect for describing that book. Maybe not so much for withholding spoilers.

Danielle Hall: 19:56 Yeah, I think that even without Westworld I would have gotten there very quickly because the book opens on Mena like, looking at a rose garden and how perfectly they grow and there's like all these comparisons of the girls being like roses. Then you have the character of Leno, n Rose and it's like, "Oh could they be grown and cultivated by people?" Like ...

Amanda Thrasher: 20:23 Oh, I just got that right now. Man I am not at it today *laughter*

Amanda Morgan: 20:27 I, you know what? I didn't pick up on that either so you're not alone Amanda.

Amanda Thrasher: 20:31 Great, thanks Mandy. Dani's over here playing chess, we're playing tic tac toe *laughter*

Amanda Morgan: 20:37 Someday maybe I'll graduate to checkers but today is not that day.

Danielle Hall: 20:41 Alright we wouldn't be the YA Café if we did not talk about "The Q"

Amanda Thrasher: 20:46 Oh yeah, we're the gay podcast, we got it, we gotta get there.

Danielle Hall: 20:48 So we have these two girls Brynn and Marcella who we know are queer and like, in the first half of the book the biggest tension is that we know that they're gonna end up married to men, like, and that they can't be together. And then all of a sudden they're cyborgs and we have a lot of questions.

Amanda Thrasher: 21:10 I thought that it was really interesting in the beginning of the book because Philomena like wouldn't really let herself consider it very much. She would sometimes think like "Brynn and Marcella love each other but how are they gonna be married. Oh, but I'm sure the school will work it out." Like ...

Danielle Hall: 21:24 She had a lot of faith in, Innovations Academy.

Amanda Thrasher: 21:26 She had a lot of faith in this place that had created her and coded her and this way. I just thought that was interesting, how even as she started to like suspect that things were getting weird and like there was wickedness happening to her and to her friends. She still like kind of felt, they'll be together in some way because the school will do the best for them. So I thought in general how slow Philomena was to figure out how bad things were. Was really well done and that was one of the ways that I saw it.

Danielle Hall: 21:57 Yeah.

Amanda Morgan: 21:58 Absolutely and it was really interesting because she help these two opposing ideas and it was almost like they're on different sides of her brain like she knew that the school wouldn't approve because they had to keep their relationships a secret but she still had so much faith in them.

Amanda Thrasher: 22:14 Yeah.

Danielle Hall: 22:15 Double think.

Amanda Morgan: 22:16 Yes, exactly and I think that, that is really one of Suzanne's talents is you know, having these various subtle details that you don't, you know like the flower garden for example.

Danielle Hall: 22:28 Yeah.

Amanda Morgan: 22:28 They, may originally pass sort of beneath your consciousness and then the more you read you're like "Oh my gosh, oh my gosh, okay it's all making sense." and I really enjoyed that about this book because it was very twisty even if you figure out the big twist early on there's still a lot of surprises. The way it's pulled together is just beautiful.

Danielle Hall: 22:52 Okay so even when the title of the book of poetry was Sharpest Thorns you didn't like remember the rose garden?

Amanda Thrasher: 23:01 God, Dani, why are you just driving this home? Like, we already told you we didn't.

Amanda Morgan: 23:06 We didn't. *laughter* I, I thought the flower imagery was great but I was like "Oh they're being compared to flowers" but it didn't like, click with me

Amanda Thrasher: 23:13 Yeah, because I thought like "they're just to be pretty" blah, blah, blah.

Amanda Morgan: 23:18 Yes, that's exactly how I read it.

Amanda Thrasher: 23:19 Like your whole cultivation thing is like a whole another thing and I just don't appreciate that you're sitting here making us feel dumb.

Amanda Morgan: 23:25 Why are you on another level? Get on our level. *laughter* Come down here.

Danielle Hall: 23:31 Alright, so I wanted to come back around to Leandra who we said you know was complicit in the system and then Mandy said like she has layers. So, we're here, we're spoiling ...

Amanda Thrasher: 23:47 So what's the layer?

Danielle Hall: 23:48 So sometimes we have brave listeners who haven't read the book and venture into the spoiler section, so just an explanatory comma that Leandra ends up being from the previous generation of girls to attend the academy or be grown by the academy. So she is one of them, not one of them, has seen the book before, is supposedly trying to destroy the system from the inside but like, still mean to them.

Amanda Thrasher: 24:21 I loved Philomena's reluctance to trust her. I thought that was really great.

Amanda Morgan: 24:28 Yes and if you think about it. It made a lot of sense because they said this particular group of girls that the book is about is the ones that they gave them the most like wit and free will to. So if Leandra's from an earlier, I don't know what you would say crop of girls if you will, she doesn't have that free will and so it's interesting to see her level of struggle.

Danielle Hall: 24:53 Ohhhhhh

Amanda Thrasher: 24:53 But, I mean but clearly she must right? Like, she must of developed something but maybe she doesn't have like the kind of deep thinking that Philomena and the others are capable of and she just like beelines straight into anger.

Danielle Hall: 25:05 And murder.

Amanda Thrasher: 25:06 And murder.

Amanda Morgan: 25:07 Which I'm down with. *laughter*

Amanda Thrasher: 25:09 Yeah, gotta get your murder on.

Amanda Morgan: 25:12 Gotta get the murder on. *laughter*

Danielle Hall: 25:14 And there's one more point that I wanna wrap around to which was the boy, Jackson like I really like that this story is not a romance. Jackson serves other purposes and Mena is like romantically interested in him but it is not central to the story.

Amanda Thrasher: 25:34 Yeah, I liked him. I thought that he was fine just fine. He just like did the right things and when he found out that the girl he had a crush on was a robot he was just kinda like "uh, okay I guess." Like ...*laughter*

Amanda Morgan: 25:47 Yeah I definitely feel like he's still dealing with that but I think we'll see more of him in future books but this wasn't the book that relied on "the boy" as a huge plot device.

Amanda Thrasher: 26:00 Yeah and also you mentioned future books, but there was a clear ending

Danielle Hall: 26:06 Yes!

Amanda Thrasher: 26:06 I'm so team clear endings, I thought it was a really strong first book for a series. 'Cause they're still a lot left but like, they accomplished the thing that they got out of the school and there's a clear end to part one and I really liked that

Danielle Hall: 26:18 You could choose not to read the rest of the books and you would still have a complete story.

Amanda Thrasher: 26:23 Yes.

Amanda Morgan: 26:24 Absolutely.

Danielle Hall: 26:25 That's our show for today friends, thank you so much for joining us Mandy.

Amanda Morgan: 26:30 Thank you so much having me. I really appreciate it.

Amanda Thrasher: 26:32 Yay Mandy!

Danielle Hall: 26:33 You can find Mandy on Twitter and Instagram @amandakmorgan and you can find us @yacafepodcast. We'd love to hear from you and it's time folks, leave us a review! Happy reading.