

YA Café Podcast
Episode 49: Internment
28 March 2019

Danielle Hall: 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 Internment by Samira Ahmed. Grab a mug of your favorite beverage, friends, and let's talk books.

Amanda Thrasher: 00:21 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 Hall: 00:29 And I'm Danielle Hall, an eighth and ninth grade English teacher, and I blog at teachnouvelle.com. Internment is a look at a horrifying near future United States in which Islamophobia and fear mongering have won. As their freedoms are stripped away, Muslims are registered and eventually rounded up as the first internment camp is opened. Layla and her family are sent to live at Mobius, passing the site of Manzanar on the way. Layla knows that history has shown us just how much hate and fear can divide the country, and even though her parents want her to keep her head down, Layla wants to find a way to make her voice heard.

Amanda Thrasher: 01:03 So this book, obviously, as you can tell from the description, talks a lot about dealing with a rise in Islamophobia. We are recording this podcast very recently after the massive Christchurch shootings in New Zealand that left almost 50 people dead that was carried out by a white supremacist on peaceful worshipers at mosques. The world is still kind of reeling from this attack, so for us going into it, it feels highly relevant for not only the rise in Islamophobia that is occurring in the U.S., but really worldwide.

Danielle Hall: 01:38 Absolutely. As I said last week, this book is set in either in near future or like an alternate United States to ours, you know it could be set in 2019. The whole point of the book is that this internment system could happen. And so this book is like kind of a dystopian version of the present, but also a cautionary tale, but also internment has happened in the past in this country and is happening now to undocumented people, so like, this is not fantasy.

Amanda Thrasher: 02:16 You mentioned that the book talks about the history of the Japanese internment during World War II. Obviously, that was a huge influencer on this novel and this vision for rounding up internal enemies to America. But like you mentioned, there are active camps right now that the U.S. is using to hold people without due process, and I thought it was odd that it wasn't in the book. Did you think that? I thought it was surprising that it wasn't mentioned. It's possible the book was written before that started happening and before it got really public. I don't know. What did you think?

Danielle Hall: 02:49 Whenever you're talking about publishing, it's hard to know when books were written versus when they're published, but it is clear that this book was informed by things that happened from 2016 forward. So there had to be a moment when the question was posed whether or not to include family separation and the internment of undocumented people. So I definitely felt the lack of that, but at the same time, I think that this was a very focused, well paced story, and maybe the concern was sort of muddying the waters of the message.

Amanda Thrasher: 03:32 Muddying the waters in what way, because the people currently being detained are not U.S. citizens versus the characters in this novel who are?

Danielle Hall: 03:39 Right. So that aspect of citizenship and then the aspect of Islamophobia.

Amanda Thrasher: 03:47 Right

Danielle Hall: 03:47 No matter what happens, we're just hypothesizing about the inclusion of that, or the conversations that happened around that, we weren't privy to them.

Amanda Thrasher: 03:57 *laughter* Right

Danielle Hall: 03:57 Which, I mean, we do a lot of hypothesizing on this podcast, so it's not like this is anything new, but I feel like this is a little bit different from like, "What if this character was secretly gay?" Because ...

Amanda Thrasher: 04:09 Because everyone knows all characters are secretly gay, so it doesn't matter. *laughter*

Danielle Hall: 04:14 Yeah, so this book starts out with a glimpse of Layla's before world. In Layla's before, there's already a curfew in place for Muslim-Americans. There have been changes in ... I mean, it's basically like Handmaid's Tale, right? There's already been changes in how people are employed, many Muslim Americans have been fired from their jobs, or things like that, and then there are also book burnings. Layla's father is a poet and works at a university, and like, basically, the book opens on his books being rounded up for burning. I thought that was super evocative, sort of like a Fahrenheit 451 thing going on.

Amanda Thrasher: 05:02 Yeah, I agree. I also really like that in the before, we had a lot of Layla's former friends and neighbors that she sees turning against her with this rising tide of hatred that is aimed towards her family and her religion and all these people that she has known her whole life all of a sudden ... or seemingly all of a sudden showing these Islamophobic going along with the fascist regime things.

Danielle Hall: 05:33 Yeah, definitely like people you thought you knew. Then she has to watch her neighbors turn on them. The other thing that is established in the before is that she has a Jewish boyfriend David. I mean, the title of the book is Internment, you know that it's coming, you understand from the beginning, like, it's not a spoiler, David is not going to be interned in this novel. It is Layla and her family.

Amanda Thrasher: 05:58 David is not interned, but one thing I wanted to mention that I really appreciated this book did was David is Jewish, her boyfriend is Jewish, and Layla in the book makes the connection that many of these people who are Islamophobic are just as anti-Semitic, it just hasn't come up yet, they haven't had the opportunity yet. I think that it was really important just to draw that line about how closely tied anti-Semitism and Islamophobia tend to be and how both groups can very easily become targets. I feel like that was not lost on Layla, and I thought it was really smart to put in the book.

Danielle Hall: 06:35 Right. Another thing I thought was smart to include in the book was that Layla is continually thinking with historical empathy, not only on the prisoners of Manzanar, but on the prisoners in the Holocaust.

Amanda Thrasher: 06:51 Yeah

Danielle Hall: 06:51 And when I say empathically, I don't mean that she's like, "Oh, this is like my situation." It is way beyond that. She is examining her feelings every step of the way with a historical lens and wondering if this connects her with people throughout history. Her feelings of detachment from her trauma as it happens, I really appreciated that. It was very, very deep.

Danielle Hall: 07:17 So Layla says, "I wonder if others felt this way? The Japanese Americans who were imprisoned during World War II, did they also feel this surreal separation from the experiences, like they were detached from their bodies watching themselves enter this camp like ghosts, shades of who they were? Did they ever wonder how long they would be here? Could they have imagined it would be years? Did some try to block it all out, compartmentalize, imagine that it was only one more

day? Because we aren't even through this giant electronic gate yet, and I feel like my real life is already a million miles away."

Danielle Hall: 07:53 And I just, I loved that. That drew me so close to Layla. Whenever she had those thoughts, it reminded me again that this book is not fantasy. These things have happened before. There's no reason to believe that they won't happen again if we give Islamophobia an inch.

Amanda Thrasher: 08:14 Right. So one of the things that I thought was interesting was how they got this list of Muslim-Americans, and that was through census responses. I found that very interesting, because there is so much debate on the right way to answer the census, because on the one hand, you want your voice to be heard, you want to be counted, you want to make sure that your area has enough constituents, that they know how to put money into resources that are valuable to your community. But on the other hand, do you really want people to have this information that could be used to hurt you, be used for some kind of registration?

Amanda Thrasher: 08:52 I feel like there's no good answer, and there's a lot of argument on either side. It's clearly something that members of Layla's community agonized over, whether or not to answer that they were Muslim, how to fill in this response, and just that her parents made this choice, like, "It's a risk, but we're not going to lie about who we are."

Amanda Thrasher: 09:12 There's a new census coming up, and there's the argument about whether or not to put the citizen question in the census. I think it's going to really impact the results, because obviously it's very hard to ask people to put their safety on the line for this kind of information. So yeah, I just thought that that was interesting and kind of a throwaway line, but super relevant for the next couple years.

Danielle Hall: 09:36 Oh, I didn't think it was a throwaway at all. I thought that that whole thing was very intentional. After they had completed the census, they had this conversation, because I think Layla ... I don't think she was necessarily advocating for her father to have done this, but she just basically raised the question, "What would it mean if we hadn't marked that box on the census?" and her father said, "We have a moral and ethical obligation to tell the truth." It raises some really interesting questions about your moral honesty versus your safety. I thought that was a really fascinating conversation. It's true that that happened before they went to the camp. I don't think it was a throwaway. I think it was really central to Samira Ahmed's thinking on this novel, but it's true that then the action started and they got shipped off. They were on a train, and they passed Manzanar, and they arrived at the camp, and like, life changed for them. But there's definitely ... That was the moment, the census was the moment that their lives changed.

Danielle Hall: 10:49 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 Internment and dig a little deeper.

Danielle Hall: 11:02 Hey friends, we need your support to keep making this podcast happen. One easy way to show your love is to order our book choices through our affiliate links. Up next, we'll be discussing Ms. Marvel Volume 1: No Normal, by G. Willow Wilson. Order this book through our link in the show notes and help us keep bringing you great content. Happy reading.

Amanda Thrasher: 11:38 Welcome back, y'all. It's time for Things We Like A Latte. Danielle, what's your brew of choice this week?

Danielle Hall: 11:42 So knowing how much you love poetry, I brought a poetry recommendation.

Amanda Thrasher: 11:47 You're so hateful.

Danielle Hall: 11:48 I'm going to bring you around to this poetry idea. So I received a copy of the new book Ink Knows No Borders, which is a collection of poetry about the immigrant and refugee experience edited by Patrice Vecchione and Alyssa Raymond. I just thought that it was a great compliment to Internment. I mean, the poems aren't fiction, they're based on peoples' experiences. But like Internment, it shows that the immigrant experience is not monolithic, just like Internment shows that the Muslim experience is not monolithic. I think that it is a beautiful collection that would be great for any classroom library.

Danielle Hall: 12:33 How about you, Amanda? What's your brew of choice this week?

Amanda Thrasher: 12:37 So I am not a good sleeper, never have been, terrible at falling asleep, but I have found a podcast that actually works for my dumb, crazy brain. It is called Sleep With Me and it's hosted by this kind of monotone rambly guy who tells this bedtime story that basically makes no sense. You just kind of follow along and it kind of takes you down some wandering tracks and then you just float away to sleep. It is the best thing. If you're bad at falling asleep, I really recommend it. The podcast is called Sleep With Me and hosted by the most boring man in the universe. I just appreciate him so much.

Danielle Hall: 13:16 That's a great recommendation.

Danielle Hall: 13:19 We're going to take a quick break. When we come back, we'll return to our discussion on Internment. 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.

Amanda Thrasher: 13:49 Welcome back, y'all, to the YA Cafe. We're continuing our discussion on Internment by Samira Ahmed. If you haven't read this yet, we want to warn you again that this segment will contain spoilers.

Danielle Hall: 14:00 I can't even say it so cheerfully, because it's not a cheerful book.

Amanda Thrasher: 14:05 It's is not a cheerful book. Alright. So where are we going first?

Danielle Hall: 14:09 So the first thing that I wanted to talk about in the spoiler section was that in the camp, each block of prisoners is managed by this, like, middle management position of Minders. The minders are collaborationists, they are ostensibly Muslim, but definitely speak the other languages of their prisoners so that no one can have conversations that somebody who only speaks English wouldn't be able to understand. So it's like an additional layer of surveillance. It is this deep feeling of betrayal from someone in their community that looks like them. I just that the minders were a really powerful symbol in the novel.

Amanda Thrasher: 15:04 Yeah, I agree. I think that they were interesting to include. Also, that they separated everybody by ethnic group, definitely worth talking about, the sort of divide and conquer philosophy they were clearly going for.

Danielle Hall: 15:16 Right. Layla is smart enough to recognize that for what it is. So there's a Desi block, and then there's a block of North African Muslims. And obviously, all of these people are American citizens, so they just did one step further of researching where their parents or grandparents came from.

Amanda Thrasher: 15:39 I'm going to interrupt you. Were they all American citizens?

Danielle Hall: 15:42 Yes.

Amanda Thrasher: 15:43 Because it mentioned that the Visa and the Green Card holders already got deported.

Danielle Hall: 15:46 Yes. I think that that was a conscious choice on Samira Ahmed's part, too. We are only talking about citizens. There can be no, "but they aren't even citizens," justification.

Amanda Thrasher: 16:00 Right

Danielle Hall: 16:00 So when she finally does get to meet her boyfriend in secret and he's been snuck into camp or whatever, and he has the audacity to suggest that she and her parents become collaborationists, like, he regrets it pretty instantly, but he can't ever unsay that suggestion.

Amanda Thrasher: 16:21 Yeah, I mean, it's not a great suggestion. It's not a great look. But if you're really scared for somebody that you love and you don't know what's happening to them and you're worried that it's going to get worse for them, it makes sense to suggest things, even if they're not, shall we say, morally upstanding.

Danielle Hall: 16:42 I agree. Ayesha says the same thing. So Ayesha is Layla's friend in the camp. Ayesha says, "I'm not sure my parents would say no to that if it meant getting us out." Alright, let's talk about homeboy.

Amanda Thrasher: 16:56 Homeboy? Oh, the guard homeboy. I feel like he gets upgraded from homeboy, right? He dies for the cause. That gives you an upgrade.

Danielle Hall: 17:04 You're jumping right into the spoilers.

Amanda Thrasher: 17:06 It's this section, it's the whole thing. *laughter*

Danielle Hall: 17:08 We always have this debate about how we're going to unravel the spoiler section, like if we're going to start with the biggest spoiler. But okay, he dies in the end. But there's this guard, and he's partial to Layla. He helps her, he ends up working for ... or he has been working for the cause to dismantle the camp and stuff like that. So he's on her side, but he is a guard. I think that I texted you as soon as I started reading about the guard and I was like, "Oh my gosh, if she ends up in love with this guy, I can't even handle it."

Amanda Thrasher: 17:45 *laughter* But she didn't, it worked well. They had a good rapport, a good rapport I thought.

Danielle Hall: 17:55 Yeah, it definitely could have gone poorly. I feel like I've read other books where the guard ends up being the love interest and blah blah blah, but this was very clearly ... It was clear that he liked her, but she was always skeptical of him. Even after she started to trust him, she would kind of feel disgust when she first saw him because he was wearing his uniform and she associated that with all the terrible things that were happening to her. Then if he touched her, she would recoil. That never left her. I thought that that was so well written, all of that.

Amanda Thrasher: 18:37 I thought that was good, too. Yeah, I agree, it did seem like he liked her, but he also was like very aware of the power dynamic. I feel like he also was pretty conscious of trying not to be threatening to her anymore than he already was with his uniform and his power and all of these kinds of things. But I think it was very well spelled out how this is not a thing, it's never going to be a thing, because they have that conversation where Layla's like, "A prisoner and a guard can never have a consensual relationship," and he says, "Yeah, I know. It's rape. It's terrible. It shouldn't be happening. I don't know who it is who's doing it." So I thought that it was good. They both acknowledged it, that this is the reality of where they were, so regardless of how he felt it seemed like he was aware of what his position meant and how it meant that he could not have this interest in her.

Danielle Hall: 19:28 Yeah. It was really great that that was lampshaded. It was obvious the whole time to both of them what people would think if they saw them together. It was obvious that it was happening elsewhere and that people were being victimized. And then it was obvious that it wasn't going to happen between them. I did like that. But the very first time she saw him and noticed his tattoo, I was like, "Ugh, please don't let this be that."

Amanda Thrasher: 19:59 But then it wasn't, so great job there.

Danielle Hall: 20:02 Yeah. So I really liked the ideological divide between Layla who advocates for strength and speaking up and her parents who advocate for silence.

Amanda Thrasher: 20:13 Which was interesting, because it was the opposite of what they started with, which was what got them in the camp in the first place.

Danielle Hall: 20:19 Right. We were talking about telling the truth about yourself on census or hiding your religion, and this is the flip of that. Her dad has this line in one of his poems and he says, "Only when you open yourself to the heart's silence can you hear its roar." And her mother's interpretation is that "This is a reminder that being quiet doesn't signify weakness. Sometimes it takes great strength to find that silence. Sometimes it takes an incredible strength to survive." So that's her mom's perspective on it, but Layla has this opportunity to write about her experiences and sneak out her writings, or David sneaks out her writings and exposes them to the world. That is what ends up shutting this camp down is Layla's voice, not her silence.

Amanda Thrasher: 21:14 I was confused by why the director acted like he didn't know who was writing these things. They got out through David. David, Layla's boyfriend, who you know Layla had a secret meeting with. Why are you trying so hard to find who has written these things?

Danielle Hall: 21:35 Right, because he saw them together.

Amanda Thrasher: 21:37 Yeah, so I was just like, "Uh, did I miss something here?" I don't know, I thought that was strange.

Danielle Hall: 21:44 So the way that I read that, there was a lot of talk in this novel about the protections given to children under 18. The implication to me was that he knew that she was responsible, but he wanted an adult to have given her the idea or to be the instigator, because he wanted to be able to punish someone without these protections that were given to people who were underage.

Amanda Thrasher: 22:11 Yeah, and you know, honestly, that is another part of the book that really maybe worked when she wrote it, but doesn't really work now when you look at our camps on the border of undocumented immigrants and how children have just vanished. Not a good look.

Danielle Hall: 22:26 Right. It would have been more realistic for the director to disregard the age, but he eventually does, because he eventually hits her.

Amanda Thrasher: 22:36 He hits Soheil right away, and I didn't get the impression he was an adult.

Danielle Hall: 22:40 He wasn't an adult. So there are parts where the director definitely loses it, but I think that the idea was that those were like him losing his temper versus an authorized questioning of an adult through whatever means necessary.

Amanda Thrasher: 22:59 Maybe.

Danielle Hall: 23:01 So at the end when it all sort of comes down to it, and we see the press on the outside of the gate and all of the kids leading the march on the inside, and everything comes to this moment. This old woman quotes Layla's father's poetry to her. She says, "We shall bear witness on the night of destiny as a hush descends and a prayer rises. There's only the listening then, to the beating heart of the earth and the flashes of thunderous light in the heavens." Then she says to Layla, "You are the beating heart of the earth." I thought that that was so beautiful and really evocative of the youth's role in dismantling a system of hate and injustice. I don't know, it spoke to me of like the March For Our Lives and a lot of youth activism that is happening now.

Amanda Thrasher: 24:01 Yeah, that is really beautiful. Overall, there were definitely things about this book that we liked and we think that is going to be a good book for any classroom library.

Danielle Hall: 24:10 That's our show for today, friends. You can find us on Instagram and Twitter @yacafepodcast, we'd love to hear from you. If you're enjoying the show, please leave us a review on iTunes. Happy reading!