

YA Café Podcast  
Episode 47: *Liar*  
7 March 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 *Liar* by Justine Larbalestier. Grab a mug of your favorite beverage, friends and let's talk books.
- Speaker 1: 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: 00:50 And I'm Danielle Hall an 8th and 9th grade English teacher and I blog at [teachnouvelle.com](http://teachnouvelle.com). We're going back into the archives for this one. *Liar* by Justine Larbalestier came out in 2009 but it's still a book we think about and we wanted to talk about it today.
- Amanda : 01:06 Micah Wilkins is a liar, she'll lie about anything. Not just for personal gain, not just for a good reason, but to see how easily someone falls for the lies that comes easily as breathing. But all that's behind her now. When her maybe-boyfriend Zachary is found dead, her whole life is thrown under a spotlight. This time, she's going to tell the whole truth. Well, almost the whole truth, anyway.
- Amanda : 01:27 So Danielle, when you first read this book, probably, I don't know, eight years ago, you did not love it completely and with every fiber of your being. Can you briefly talk about some other things you've been very wrong about? \*laughter\*
- Danielle: 01:44 Well, there was that extended period of time in our lives where we had soup every night for dinner and I thought you liked soup and you don't.
- Amanda : 01:55 Probably about the same level of wrongness \*laughter\*

Danielle: 02:00 Okay. Right out the door, I want to say that our dear friend Mandy, Amanda K. Morgan has kind of brought me around on the liar thing.

Amanda : 02:11 Yeah.

Danielle: 02:12 And you know, I thought, "Oh, she would be a great person to like do this episode with." But we already have her coming on next week for *Girls With Sharp Sticks* by Suzanne Young. So we thought a doubleheader wasn't necessarily in the works. Anyway, Blah Blah Blah. Mandy loves liars. And so I tried to go into this book on my second read thinking, "Amanda loves liars. Mandy loves liars. Maybe there's something to this."

Amanda : 02:38 And?

Danielle: 02:40 No. It's just not ... like I get it. Like it's like a choose your own adventure, which version of the story you want to believe. But whatever. We could talk about all that in a spoiler section. So one thing I appreciate as a reader is that Micah talks directly to us. She positions herself as setting the record straight. She says, "I will tell you my story and I will tell it straight. No lies, no omissions." And the book is called *Liar*. So it's right there. You know from the jump that you cannot trust her. So I do like that a lot. It didn't sneak up on me like some other books that I can't name because even naming other books would be spoilers. Right?

Amanda : 03:28 Yeah. God, I just love this book so much. I loved it when I first read it. I've read it probably like four times. So there was a whole brouhaha when this book first came out when the publishing industry decided to just whitewash the crap out of it. The original advanced reader copy had a white character on the cover.

Danielle: 03:49 What?

Amanda : 03:50 It was the face of a white girl. The Internet was like, "No, you can't do this. Micah is clearly black. You cannot have a white long hair girl on the cover and say that she's Micah." So they did change it, which was really incredible. And we wound up with a really great cover that we got with the book. But it was this was this whole thing. I remember getting this book then because I'd heard about it from that. But I didn't know a whole lot about the book, but I was very like, "Publishing doesn't think books with black people on 'em can sell? Fine publishing. Fine."

- Amanda : 04:27 So I bought the book. And then just loved it all to pieces. I really love Micah. I think she's an incredible character. Her voice is really captivating and everything about Micah as this character who, her lies have defined her life in this really obvious way. She goes to school and she just decides, "Yeah, I'll just tell everybody my father is an arms dealer." And I'm like, "Oh yeah, I definitely told those kinds of lies when I was like elementary and middle school.
- Danielle: 04:56 Elementary and middle school, high school, college. Anytime I'm on an airplane.
- Amanda : 05:02 Okay. I think that airplane lies are different.
- Danielle: 05:06 I was thinking about you and I read this conversation between Justine Larbalestier and John Green on her blog about liars, and Justine calls these sorts of lies 'reinventing-myself lies', and that is exactly what you do. Anytime you have the opportunity to tell someone an absurd story about yourself, you do it. Which is crazy because you are a helicopter pilot.
- Amanda : 05:33 but I don't do this with people that matter. I don't lie to people I care about in my life. It's just like if you're sitting in an airplane, nobody wants to hear, "Oh, I'm on the way to visit a very sick family member." No, you tell them you're going to audition to the Metropolitan Opera because that's a much more interesting story.
- Amanda : 05:51 There's a line where Micah, it's later in the book, and they're talking about all the different reasons that psychologists have decided that Micah lies. One of the things that she says in there is "Nobody has ever suggested that I lie because the world is better the way I tell it." That is me on airplanes. I'm like, "Yes, that exactly." \*laughter\*
- Danielle: 06:16 So I have a favorite fictional Liar and I share this person with Justine Larbalestier, and that is Lyra from the Golden Compass.
- Amanda : 06:29 It's right there in the name.

- Danielle: 06:31 I guess when I was reading that book, I was saying her name Lee-rya, until the birds in the trees are like, "Liar, liar, liar." And I'm like, "Oh, I get it." \*laughter\* But I love Lyra, and there's this quote about her, which reminds me of you, which reminds me of Micah.
- Danielle: 06:52 "... and now that she was doing something difficult and familiar and never quite predictable -namely lying- she felt a sort of mastery again. The same sense of complexity and control that the alethiometer gave her." That of course is from the Golden Compass, which is part of the His Dark Materials trilogy which everybody needs to read because it's awesome.
- Amanda : 07:13 That was quite the explanatory comma.
- Danielle: 07:16 Yeah. \*laughter\* All right, so we talked about lying. Let's talk about the book. This book has split timelines. It has a before and an after, which is how you really know stuff is going to go all over the place. Anytime there's a before and an after, I'm like, "Okay."
- Amanda : 07:34 And interspersed with each other. I mean there's before and after in like, Looking For Alaska but like there's a clear delineation of like, "This is the before and this is the after." But for this it's all intermixed and intermingled to build this narrative of the story of Micah and Zach's relationship and Micah's relationship with herself and family. That's the way that it's all splintered together.
- Danielle: 07:55 Yes. Justine actually shouts out the editing program or the word processing program, I guess it's kind of both, Scrivener, which allows you to storyboard and move cards around and, I dunno, reading these sorts of things, they're definitely a brain twister, but it all works out.
- Danielle: 08:17 The 'before' and, this is page two, so whatever. But the 'before' is before Zack dies and the 'after' is after.
- Amanda : 08:29 One other thing I find really interesting about the structure of this book is that the way that it comes together is in a lot of ways the way that stories come together. You have the narrative, which is what you want to say, then you're like, "Oh, but this happened back then. So let me go back and explain this a little bit," and that sort of thing. So throughout the whole way that the book is structured, it's framing it as this way that Micah is building her story and her reality or telling the truth. And how that comes together is, I think, a really interesting way of seeing the way that your brain puts pieces in place, not always in order.

Danielle: 09:05 Yeah, I can totally see that.

Danielle: 09:07 One of the things I wanted to mention, in the spoiler-free section that we will return to after the break, is that the first piece of this novel that Micah readily identifies as a lie that she is telling, so she identifies it in the book as a lie of omission, is that when she arrives at her new school, a teacher assumes that she is a boy. She does not correct them, and then her classmates assume that she is a boy and she lives her first two days of school with everyone believing she's a boy. We're going to come back to that, but I thought that it was a really interesting piece of Micah's character.

Danielle: 09:45 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 Liar and dig a little deeper.

Danielle: 10:04 Hey friends, we need your support to keep making this podcast happen one easy way to show your love is to order about choices through our affiliate links. This will be at no additional cost to you, but we'll get a small kickback to keep our show going. Up next we'll be discussing Girls With Sharp Sticks by Suzanne Young. Pre-order this book through our affiliate link in our show notes and help us keep bringing you great content. Happy reading.

Amanda : 10:39 Welcome back y'all. It's time for Things We Like A Latte. Danielle, what's your brew of choice this week?

Danielle: 10:43 Well Amanda.

Amanda : 10:45 Well, Danielle?

Danielle: 10:47 So my Thing I Like A Latte does not start with a Thing I Like A Latte, which is plagiarism. I don't like plagiarism at all.

Amanda : 10:59 Hot take.

Danielle: 10:59 I know, right? Basically, I follow a romance writer on Twitter, Courtney Milan, I love her work. She writes a lot of regency novels, I love her stuff. She basically came out this week and said, "My work has been plagiarized by this person and so has a bunch of other peoples'." She totally stood up for herself and a lot of other people were able to come forward and say that they had been plagiarized. It's not an easy thing to do, to say, "My work has been taken." But it's definitely a thing that, if you are an artist, you should feel able to stand up for yourself. But there's sometimes a lot of industry pressure not to, and especially as women, you know, "Don't cause a scene. Don't stir the pot. Play it cool. It's better for your career." And I'm just so proud of Courtney Milan for standing up for herself and that's the Thing I Like A Latte.

Amanda : 12:03 That's great.

Danielle: 12:04 How about you Amanda? What's your brew of choice?

Amanda : 12:08 Well, I haven't had too many brews lately because I'm in training and so the Thing I Like A Latte is the helicopter manual and Coast Guard policy, which is not super interesting. But I did watch one episode of a show that I found really interesting as a person involved in search and rescue and as a helicopter pilot, called The Horn. It's basically this documentary series of a rescue team who does the ice rescues and climbing rescues on Matterhorn. It's really great just seeing their process and the tools that they use and how they all work as a team. If you are at all interested in helicopter flying in ridiculous conditions or ice rescue or rock climbing, any of these things. I think it's a cool show. I've only seen one episode, but I'm looking forward to more of it. That was The Horn and that's on Netflix.

Danielle: 13:00 Wow, that sounds really cool. Do you think you're going to keep watching?

Amanda : 13:04 I think it's good for now because it feels almost like studying. Right? If I watch other people flying helicopters, that counts as studying?

Danielle: 13:10 I love it.

Danielle: 13:12 We're going to take a quick break and when we come back we'll return to our discussion on Liar. The rest of the show will contain spoilers. If you're leaving us here, keep in touch on Instagram and Twitter @yacafepodcast. We'll be back!

Amanda : 13:43 Welcome back y'all to the YA cafe. We're continuing our discussion on Liar by Justine Larbalestier. If you haven't read this yet, we want to warn you again that this segment will contain spoilers.

Danielle: 13:51 Spoilers!

Amanda : 13:54 Most strenuously, we want to warn you, this contains spoilers. I cannot express to you enough, this is a much better book if you go into it without spoilers. So if you haven't read this book, please, please, please don't listen to the rest of this episode.

Danielle: 14:10 \*sings\* Look away. Look away.

Amanda : 14:11 Just like that. \*laughter\*

Danielle: 14:12 All right.

Amanda : 14:14 All right, so seriously, if you haven't read the book, go away. The rest of you, welcome to the spoiler section.

Danielle: 14:19 We're about to do it.

Amanda : 14:20 It's happening.

Danielle: 14:21 It's happening. This is funny because this is about the point in the book where the major twist happens, right?

Amanda : 14:28 Yes.

Danielle: 14:28 It's about like the 30%, we're at like 30% of our show and the major twist is about to happen. Here it comes!

Amanda : 14:36 Drum roll.

Danielle: 14:39 She is a werewolf. Or is she?

Danielle: 14:46 Oh my God, this book. \*laughter\*

Amanda : 14:51 You didn't love it? I loved it. So I'm trying to remember what it felt like when I first read this book because I read it right when it came out and I was obsessed with it instantly. But I'm trying just to remember and recapture how that twist felt reading it. How did it feel for you? Do you remember?

Danielle: 15:10 \*sigh\*

Amanda : 15:10 Oh I do remember because you were really down on it. You were like, "I thought it was realistic fiction, then it was fantasy." And I was like, "But it's not the though."

Danielle: 15:19 I dunno, I still don't know. I've been thinking about how to articulate this all day and I still don't know. But basically in the first third of the book, you know that Micah had this family illness and she had like hair all over her body that went away when she hit puberty and you know that there's like something weird going on, because everything smells vaguely meaty to her. So whatever. Mandy calls them bread crumbs, the breadcrumbs are there. That was all fine. Her mom and dad are obsessed with reminding her to take her pill, which of course is birth control and we find out after the whole werewolf revelation that basically being a werewolf is brought on by ministrations. So she changes once a month. And the boy werewolves can only change if they're around girl werewolves. So girls have responsibility for that too and blah blah blah. We can talk about all that.

Amanda : 16:21 Wait. Hold on. So that's just like the thing that happened. But if the girl werewolves only changed around boy werewolves, we'd be saying, "Oh, because girl werewolves, they're automatically tethered to boy werewolves and they can't be werewolves on their own, Hashtag feminism."

Danielle: 16:37 No it's not. I'm not critical of that. I think that that was a very intentional thing on Justine's part. And even later in the book, Micah's dad says to her, he's like, "Well, how did that boy change into a werewolf? Were you by him? It's clearly your fault." It's intentional. I get it. Justine is making an observation about society and sexism. I get it. I am not saying that that was a bad detail. I am just saying like this whole Werewolf thing, it's a whole thing. I don't know. I want to be able to articulate what held me up loving this book and I guess it's open to interpretation. It is open to many different readings, and I do like that aspect. I guess I just didn't like the revelation at the 30%, like, it felt like two different books. There, I said it.

Amanda : 17:35 So that is an opinion. My opinion is, she's a liar. She told big lies, we believed it. Like she was talking about her brother, we believed it. We, the reader, obviously. From Micah's perspective, we're picking up everything that she's putting down. Why not go for just the biggest lie of all? I don't think she's werewolf in real life. I mean, it's a book of fiction but I don't think she's a werewolf. I think that being a werewolf is this lie that she has come up with because it is a reason for why she doesn't feel like a normal girl. It's a reason for why she feels violent and angry, and a reason why she killed Zack.

Danielle: 18:16 Boom. Mic drop.

Amanda : 18:18 Boom. I mean I don't know if that's a mic drop, it's a pretty common reading but it's just, she saw willing victims in us, our hapless readers. She was like, "Oh these idiots will believe everything. I turn into a wolf once a month. It's because of my period or whatever." Like, \*laughter\*

Danielle: 18:37 So as you know, I don't believe that she is werewolf.

Amanda : 18:42 Right.

Danielle: 18:42 But I had a different reading. I also like did not believe her brother ever existed, like, when she was talking to him. And this is an interesting point, once again, I cannot name book titles, but I do not know whether or not I thought her brother existed the first time I read it, I do not remember. But now I am super skeptical of characters that end up not existing. I don't know if this book made me that way, or if I've always been that way, but I'm always skeptical that characters don't exist.

Amanda : 19:15 But I think Jordan absolutely did exist -Jordan was Micah's brother - he absolutely existed.

Danielle: 19:20 But not on the page when we see him.

Amanda : 19:23 No, but I think that like Micah told us that he existed because she, like she says, the world is better the way she tells it and in this version of the world, her brother is still around being a brat that she hates. But she didn't kill him by accident.

Danielle: 19:37 Right.

Amanda : 19:38 And that means that her relationship with her parents is not as strained as it is in the actual reality that she has to deal with.

Danielle: 19:44 Right. I read it that she killed him. Even though I read it differently from you, in my head, what we see on the page of him, quote unquote existing, is after she killed him and she pretends that he's still alive. But anyway, that's very confusing and hopefully everybody who hasn't read the book has left at this point.

Amanda : 20:05 I hope that also.

Danielle: 20:06 And everybody still with us on the same page.

Danielle: 20:09 Okay, so you mentioned one reading of the book, which is that Micah is using the whole werewolf thing as a lie that justifies her violent nature and feeling like an outsider.

Amanda : 20:23 And further on that reading, at least my reading, this is my interpretation of the book, is that she has been committed to some kind of like juvenile facility or institution because there are flashes of reality that come through where she's like, "I'm stuck in this cell and they feed me pills." The school that she's in used to be a women's prison.

Danielle: 20:41 Right.

Amanda : 20:42 There's all these hints in there that show that she is not free on the farm.

Danielle: 20:47 Right.

Amanda : 20:47 Or living at college, as she wants us to believe.

Danielle: 20:52 We cannot mention any other titles. It's mind blowing, how many things I want to mention here. But we will call that version of events version two. Version number one is straight fantasy: she's werewolf.

Amanda : 21:04 Okay.

Danielle: 21:05 So reading number one; fantasy. She actually is a werewolf that lies. Reading number two: she is telling her version of events from some sort of facility. Version number three, my version, which we should say Justine Larbalestier has said was not her intention at all. But my version is that this is Micah's gender dysphoria and the wolf stuff, her wolf story, is an extended metaphor constructed from her gender dysphoria. Right? The wolf is the male reality that she wants to live. She feels somewhere between this like male and female binary and she's somewhere on that spectrum and like, she suppresses the wolf self through birth control. I don't know. It is complicated, because she has complicated feelings, but like, in my reading Micah is gender queer. Like I said, Justine said no.

Amanda : 22:08 So I dislike that reading. I think that there's a lot of people probably who agree with you, because there's definitely some textual support for it. But I guess what I don't understand about that reading is trans people are not violent. Being gender queer is not usually a precursor to lashing out at the world in this way that she has. I mean, obviously like trans people can be serial killers too. But like in that way, anybody can be a serial killer if you put your mind to it. But I just don't understand because the wolf is clearly part of the violence inside her that is directed outward towards other people. And also, I should put in here, mentally ill people are not more likely to be violent than the general population. They're much more likely to have violence done upon them, which is its own conversation if that's your interpretation of her werewolf-ness, but important to mention to know not to build a stigma against folks with mental illness.

- Amanda : 23:06 With this reading of her as transgender, how does the actual violence, how does the white boy running around who she says killed him, how does that play out for you? What does that mean? Is it all lies? Is Zach not dead?
- Danielle: 23:18 I guess in my reading, Zach is dead, but she did not kill him. But he did have violence done to him. Perhaps if this is something that she is creating to either make her reality more livable, like you said, make the world better than it is, perhaps he had violence done to him because of his relationship with her. That happens in our world. Trans people have violence done to them and then people who are with trans people have violence done to them. So like, that's real.
- Danielle: 23:52 I do not think that the wolf itself was violent. I think her internal struggle with giving into the wolf or having her life in the city undisturbed or un-complicated, those were struggles. But she says herself that when she was on the farm actually being a wolf, she loved it. She did say that, that she loved it.
- Danielle: 24:17 She wants to go on to study from a biological perspective, her werewolf self. She loved those things. So even if we perceive all of this as happening only in her head, she's not violent as the wolf. That's the whole point. Living this wolf-human binary is not outwardly violent, it's inwardly violent. I think the brother thing, because I had said that in my reading she did kill Jordan, is unrelated. She got mad, she killed Jordan, but it's not because she is gender queer. It's because kids can be violent to each other. So I guess if you wanted to point out a loose end in my reading, that's the one. But I'm not trying to say that trans people or gender queer folx are violent.
- Amanda : 25:09 I did not think you were trying to say that.
- Danielle: 25:10 Okay.
- Amanda : 25:10 I was just asking for how you read the book.
- Danielle: 25:14 I just want to clarify for our readers that I don't think that trans people are murderous.
- Amanda : 25:20 Hot takes from the YA Cafe.

Danielle: 25:23 I know, right?

Amanda : 25:23 Well, we can agree to disagree, and that is why I want you to love this book so much more, because there's so many valid interpretations of it. I feel like it is extremely skillful to write a book in which there is so much ambiguity in the ending about what is real and what is not real. Having a book where you can just parse this apart and try to figure out what's reality, in a work of fiction, is already just incredible. It's so good to go through and try to understand. She's an unreliable narrator, but there's a real story in here somewhere.

Danielle: 26:00 Right.

Amanda : 26:01 And trying to parse out what is the true story, I just think it says so many interesting things about who we are as readers and how we consume fiction and how fiction takes on its own reality. I just love it.

Danielle: 26:15 I do appreciate that. Particularly, from the perspective of a teacher, just as we are sitting here having to do ... you have to find, not like, 'find the textual evidence that supports your claims,' but you have to support your claims with evidence. If you're going to talk about different readings, you have to support your reading. Obviously, the person with the more details that support their reading, that can tie up all those loose ends, they win. Because marriage is competition. \*laughter\*

Danielle: 26:47 But I also thought that it was masterful. I did think that everything was intentional. Just because I didn't like it as much as you do or whatever, it doesn't mean that I don't think that it works.

Danielle: 27:01 So I read some bad reviews before we did this podcast episode.

Amanda : 27:06 Boo! All those people are wrong, objectively.

Danielle: 27:10 Basically, they said, to paraphrase, that this book was a hot pile of garbage because it's so here and there. But I disagree. Every single thing is intentional and skillful.

Amanda : 27:24 Oh, yeah.

Danielle: 27:25 Intentional and skillful. So this is not a Scrivener disaster. This is a Scrivener masterpiece.

Speaker 1: 27:34 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. If you're enjoying the show, leave us a review. Happy reading.