

YA Café Podcast
Episode 51: *Pilu of the Woods*
11 April 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 *Pilu of the Woods* by Mai K. Nguyen and our thoughts on trauma-informed teaching. Grab a mug of your favorite beverage, friends, and let's talk books.

Danielle Hall: 00:21 Welcome y'all. Our entire show today will be spoiler-free. I'm Danielle Hall, an eighth and ninth grade English teacher, and I blog at TeachNouvelle.com. Today I'm joined by novelist and activist H.D. Hunter. Hi, Hugh.

Hugh: 00:35 Hello, friend. Thank you for having me.

Danielle Hall: 00:37 Thank you for coming back to join us, me, I guess. I'm all alone today, so I'm super glad you're here.

Hugh: 00:44 Thank you. Happy to be here.

Danielle Hall: 00:46 Happy until we talk about trauma.

Hugh: 00:50 Right, happy for the moment, until it gets serious.

Danielle Hall: 00:53 We are kind of mixing things up today. But before we start any of that, let's talk about you. So Hugh, your latest book is called *Torment*, and we talked about this novella a little bit at our year end episode. But in case people didn't catch it, this novella is about Kamani's reflection on his childhood, family and education. But I thought it was interesting that the narrative voice is adult. This is a really interesting choice to me because you've said yourself that you set out to write this book for middle schoolers. And I know you talk to middle schoolers all the time about this book. So why did you choose to write in an adult voice?

Hugh: 01:34 So my hope was that middle schoolers would be able to look at the different flashbacks and reflections Kamani has and really identify with his actions and some of his escapades during those

escapades, and we also end up getting the wisdom of his present-time narration. So I think typically we read books with flashbacks, and it's pretty intuitive that we're looking into the past, but for middle schoolers that are the age that Kamani is in these flashbacks, it's almost like they get to see into the future and examine different thought patterns or different emotional choices that they may have to make one day and prepare for them in advance. So that was sort of what my hope would be, and I've talked to a bunch of different classes at this point, and I think it sticks sometimes, so that makes me feel a little better.

Danielle Hall: 02:28 Do they feel like they're time traveling?

Hugh: 02:31 Yes. I have heard that. And some people like it, but I think it just keeps the storyline a little bit interesting.

Danielle Hall: 02:38 And when you go on these classroom visits, what do students say are their favorite parts of the novella?

Hugh: 02:43 So Akila, who is Kamani's sister, everybody loves Akila, can't get enough of Akila. I talk about her more than I talk about anything else whenever I talk to students that have read the book. Aside from that, what I hear from teachers a lot is that the book opens up conversations about identity in a way that they are really appreciative of. So I've been on visits where students who feel like they're a part of a marginalized identity feel a little bit more empowered to speak out during the workshop or whatever sort of discussion we're having. Also, I think students have been engaging in some pretty open discussion about identity and sharing things with each other that they might not get to share during the course of a regular day. So it's always great when I get to visit. It feels kind of like a fun day, and we can accomplish some things that maybe we couldn't accomplish if we had more of an agenda.

Danielle Hall: 03:37 Yeah, I can totally see that. And when you post videos on Instagram, it's clear that the kids are excited to talk about it. You're a new voice in their classroom, but also a familiar voice because they've already read Torment.

Hugh: 03:51 Yes.

Danielle Hall: 03:52 So you set Torment in a small Midwestern town, but you are from Atlanta.

Hugh: 03:58 Correct.

Danielle Hall: 03:59 So how did you get inspiration for that setting, and why not set it in Atlanta?

Hugh: 04:05 So in Atlanta we make a big joke out of the fact that as soon as you get out of Atlanta, you remember that you're in Georgia. *both laughing* And I think it's probably that way for a lot of other states that have metropolitan hubs that a lot of people are familiar with and then a majority of rural areas in the rest of their state.

Hugh: 04:26 Since the tragedy in Ferguson with Mike Brown in 2014, I did a lot of reading just about that area and what it was like before, what it's been like since then. And I always wanted to write something that could speak to the experience of existing in a place that was similar to Ferguson, but I felt sort of limited for that particular topic because I wasn't there. That isn't exactly what I've been able to live. And so I chose nowhere, which is how we describe the setting or the town of the book, and tried to fashion it into just your general Midwestern town based off of being inspired by Ferguson to try to address some of those different social elements of growing up in a place that's maybe not the most progressive, maybe not the most friendly at times depending on what the different factors are.

Danielle Hall: 05:19 That makes a lot of sense. So one of the aspects of Torment that kind of led us to come together for this conversation today is that Torment deals a lot with grief, and family, and in a way education because Kamani is reflecting on his school experiences as well. And so today we've kind of started from the jumping off point of Pilu of the Woods, but we're going to transition into talking about students who are grieving and trauma-informed teaching.

Danielle Hall: 05:54 So, starting with Pilu. Pilu of the Woods is a graphic novel which follows an episode in Willow's life after the death of her mother. After Willow gets in a fight with her older sister, she runs away to the woods to calm down. There she meets Pilu, a young tree spirit who feels her mother doesn't love her. Can the two girls help each other find peace among turmoil?

Danielle Hall: 06:17 This is just a beautiful little graphic novella. It reminded me of a warm cup of tea, just a quick exploration into a really tough topic. What were your first impressions, Hugh?

Hugh: 06:34 I thought it was beautiful as well. It's always a pleasure to get to read something with illustrations. So the way that the art compliments the writing is really strong, and obviously a book

with sort of a deep emotional component to it. So I think it was perfect, the way that we could see the beauty in the art and also see the beauty in the emotions that were expressed. They complemented each other very well.

Danielle Hall: 07:01 I loved that too. I love how bold the artwork is and the colors on the page, but then there's this whole aspect of nature, and nature has its own font. I love fonts. And one of the things I really related to is that after her mother died, Willow started exhibiting feelings of doubt and anger and self loathing, and these things come out erratically. She has started getting in trouble at school. She's fighting with her sister and her father. And she calls these feelings her little monsters. And on the page, they're like actually monsters, and she tries to keep them in a jar. She doesn't feel in control of her emotions anymore. And I definitely felt that way as a grieving kid, and Kamani had to feel that way Torment.

Hugh: 07:58 Absolutely. I definitely agree. I thought that the choice of depicting the emotions as living, breathing monsters was one of my favorite choices. I like that they get their own frames. Like there's literally times where we're just seeing the monsters and how they're reacting to things that are happening in Pilu's life or in the conversations that she's having at the moment. So I thought it was great, being able to follow their story in a way, but also follow what's happening in the plot of what we're reading. It was really good.

Danielle Hall: 08:29 I thought so too. Definitely a quick read and good for an elementary school or a middle school classroom library.

Danielle Hall: 08:36 And with that, friends, we'll take our first break. When we come back, we'll add some other books to the conversation and dig a little deeper.

Danielle Hall: 08:51 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 *In the Key of Nira Ghani* by Natasha Deen. Order this book through the link in our show notes and help us keep bringing you great content. Happy reading.

Danielle Hall: 09:20 Welcome back y'all to the YA Cafe. We're continuing our discussion on books about grief and how they can assist us in trauma-informed teaching. We are going to avoid spoilers altogether today. No spoilers.

Danielle Hall: 09:35 So, it's about to get real. Here we go.

Hugh: 09:37 Here we go.

Danielle Hall: 09:40 *laughter* Sweet and happy book about grief, but now we're going to get in it. So we read some other books about grief, and one of the first ones you suggested, Hugh, was Tyler Johnson Was Here by Jay Coles. So, just a quick summary for listeners. I feel that it is reductive to say that this is a Black Lives Matter book, but it is a book about an unarmed black teenager who gets murdered by a police officer. The book's narrator is the brother, and in this really big way, the book is more about his grief than any sort of indictment of the institutionalized racism in the justice system.

Hugh: 10:29 For sure. There are probably a million and one different things we could talk about related to Tyler Johnson Was Here, but I think my most favorite would be following Marvin's journey, Tyler's brother, and how he copes with the loss of his brother, how he views the world, how he looks at the changes in his friends and his family members sort of in the wake of the tragedy. I thought it was really poignant writing. I felt seen in a lot of ways, by some of the different descriptions of emotions. And I think that the book has the power to do that, to make you feel validated in different things that you might feel related to grief.

Danielle Hall: 11:09 One of the moments that made me feel really seen, like you're talking about, having your feelings validated, was when Marvin said, "It's just that you force all the muscles in your face to create the illusion of happiness," and those moments where it's almost like other people decide when you should no longer be sad, but they can't make that decision.

Hugh: 11:35 Right.

Danielle Hall: 11:35 And then the really confusing thing, and this comes into play in Marvin's life because he's really interested in this girl, and he feels like he can't be interested in this girl and grieving at the same time, but grief is like a roller coaster. Some you could be in love with someone and feel completely happy, and then the next day just be back completely in the depths of despair.

Hugh: 12:03 Totally. One of the notes I made was the question that I think Jay Coles definitely gets it answering or at least bringing up it was, how do you communicate your new reality after a tragedy? How do you learn to talk about yourself? How do you learn to talk about the person that you've lost? How do you communicate how it makes you feel? And I think we see that with Marvin and all of his relationships. And I like that we don't necessarily get an easy answer. Like you mentioned, it's a roller coaster. We go up and down with him as he's experiencing sort of pressure from the community. He's

still going to school and dealing with, you know, just the life of an everyday teenager. But I thought it was a really important statement by the book to key in on the difficulty of, not only redefining in some ways what your lived experience is, but being able to communicate that.

Danielle Hall: 13:01 Yeah, that really resonated with me too, communication and, like, who doesn't need you to communicate with them? And how you're more drawn to people that you don't have to explain yourself too.

Hugh: 13:16 Definitely.

Danielle Hall: 13:17 So one of the things that I've been thinking about lately ... I read Tyler Johnson Was Here. I had read The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas previously, and I just finished When They Call You a Terrorist, which is a memoir by Black Lives Matter cofounder, Patrisse Khan-Cullors ... was the distinction between private and public grief. So Willow's grief in Pulu of the Woods is private. Her classmates may know that her mother died, her community may know that her mother died, but at no point is she like handed a microphone and asked to talk about what that feels like. Whereas Marvin, Marvin's mother, Starr and Starr's family in The Hate U Give, and any of these numerous family members of unarmed black teenagers who are murdered by cops are handed a microphone and asked to make their grief public and political, and that is a whole different thing.

Hugh: 14:24 Absolutely. I think it's really courageous to write from the perspective of the person who was handed that microphone. I can imagine that it's a burden that you never really expect that you would have to bear. So being able to gracefully navigate detailing the experience or shedding some light on what might be going through a person's mind in that situation, it's a really big sort of chunk to bite off in terms of writing from that perspective.

Danielle Hall: 14:54 Yeah. So Hugh, when I was rereading Torment, I realized that when your young protagonist is introduced to the concept of Ujima, and I don't think that you mention it specifically related to grief, but as soon as I read it, it was applicable to this idea of public grief. So could you explain what Ujima is to you and how it relates to your feelings about grief?

Hugh: 15:25 Absolutely. Ujima is one of the Nguzo Saba, which are seven principles of Kwanzaa, a Pan-African holiday that runs from December 26th through the New Year. It's actually correlated with the third day of Kwanzaa, and it means collective work and responsibility. So basically the idea that we work on community projects together. We make one another's problems and responsibilities our own in an effort to achieve goals as a unit.

- Danielle Hall: 15:59 So when you were writing about this in *Torment*, what ways did you feel that this idea connected to grief specifically and then public and private and this whole thing we've been talking about?
- Hugh: 16:11 I think my biggest thing, and we see this in I think most of these other books that were mentioning, the focus of the narrative, the protagonist, they aren't as successful navigating their grief without some sort of community around them. Willow had Pilu. Marvin has his group of friends, and we sort of see that being able to build bonds and relationships in the wake of a tragedy with people that support you, that can be patient with you, it really ends up making a difference. And so I think it's a really important part of being able to navigate grief successfully.
- Hugh: 16:51 And when I think about *Ujima*, I think about how the structures in our society have very little opportunity to change without people pushing for that change. And the thing that I hate the most about stigma is that it pulls the collective away from the individual or the minority group in the time that the individual or the minority group needs them the most. So I think about people pushing for change and then structures changing. And then the structures that change end up benefiting, not only the folks who need the help at that time, but everybody else that comes after them and that may need that same sort of help. And so writing about *Ujima* as it relates to grief, the idea is that the more interconnected we can be, the more that we can cast stigma aside and try to support each other in the ways that are really meaningful, then we end up with a society that's just more caring and more responsive to very, very tough things to get through. And I think it gives everybody a little bit more hope about being able to get through them successfully.
- Danielle Hall: 17:56 Absolutely. I love that thought. That is so true. If I could summarize in one sentence why I think trauma-informed teaching is so important, it's exactly what you said, that to not do so would be to perpetuate the stigma. And that stigma, as you said, pulls the collective away from the individual when the individual needs it most. So kudos to you. That was beautifully said.
- Hugh: 18:24 One of the other books that I've read recently that I really thoroughly enjoyed is *Hold Still* by Nina LaCour. She's definitely one of my favorite writers right now, and she has a really awesome podcast as well for writers about writing.
- Danielle Hall: 18:38 I had no idea.
- Hugh: 18:40 Yeah, it's called *Keeping a Notebook*. The second season should be coming out pretty soon, but the first season was last year. And if you're a writer at any stage in the process, it can definitely help you with just kind of sorting things out in your mind.

Hugh: 18:54 But *Hold Still* is an awesome book. It covers the story of a protagonist who has a best friend that dies by suicide, and with everything that's happening in society now that puts more and more pressure on all of us, but especially looking at things like rising suicide rates in teenagers and their expression of how much stress and anxiety they feel on a daily basis, I think it's a really, really important topic to be able to broach somehow, and literature often offers a great pathway to do that. I think it's another angle or version of grief when you're in that particular situation, and so it can be unique in its expression and in how it affects somebody, but I think Nina LaCour does a great job at being really graceful and delicate with her language, but also very honest in how she brings her characters through the situation.

Hugh: 19:48 So it was a really great read. I think that once again I felt very seen by some of the expressions of our protagonists and how she, over the course of a little more than a year, goes on this journey to redefine her life, to build new friendships, to make sense the best she can out of what has happened in the past. And there's some of the stuff that we talked about earlier too, her relationships with teachers, her parents, other adults in the community, her friends. You kind of get a 360 view of all the ways that a tragedy that happens so close to you might affect the people that you are close to just as much as it affects you.

Danielle Hall: 20:29 I'll definitely have to check that book out. I know that, unfortunately most of our listeners will have had or will have over the course of their careers a student in their school die by suicide. Suicide is unfortunately much more difficult to deal with for many schools because students in the school need the space to mourn, but schools cannot glorify suicide. So oftentimes if you have students die in a car accident, you'll see memorials go up, you'll see vigils being held. But if a student dies by suicide, their friends are not afforded the same space. So I think that that is one aspect of trauma-informed teaching that we could work on hard because students need to know that they're not alone, but it's a fine line, you know?

Hugh: 21:31 Yeah, absolutely. Very tough.

Danielle Hall: 21:34 So I would like to kind of segue more into the specifics of trauma-informed teaching. I think I've made reference on this podcast before because dead moms are so prevalent in fiction and movies, and I have a dead mom. I'm part of the dead mom club. I lost my mother when I was nine years old, so I was in fourth grade. It's been over 20 years, and it still affects me every day. That is what a lot of people who haven't experienced trauma firsthand maybe don't see. And this is a distinction between childhood trauma and adult trauma, right? The situations that I've encountered in my adult life, I have healed from much more quickly than the death of my mother when I was nine. There's just a total difference between trauma you live as an adult, and trauma you experience as a child. But I thought before we jumped into more specifics of trauma-informed teaching, I could share the worst memory I have of being in school and dealing with grief.

Danielle Hall: 22:46 So I lost my mother in fourth grade. I hated 'your mom' jokes, et cetera, et cetera. Those things were pretty normal. And then I thought I was doing okay, right? Sixth grade, seventh grade, I wasn't crying all the time. I thought everything was great. I thought I was healing, and then I get to eighth grade Spanish class. It was a Spanish only class, right? You could only say things in Spanish.

Danielle Hall: 23:14 We were going over the unit of talking about your family and for whatever reason, my Spanish teacher, who was an otherwise sweet dude, wanted us to talk about ... I mean, what do I know? It was all in Spanish, so maybe we had the choice, but I felt like I was being told to say characteristics about my mother in present tense. And I literally did not have the words to express all of the feelings that I had about this, and I ended up storming out of class and going to cry in the bathroom. And my Spanish teacher didn't know what was going on, and none of the kids at my middle school, like had gone to my elementary school, they didn't necessarily know that my mother was dead. And *sigh* I still remember like what I was wearing on that day. I remember how completely triggering that experience was for me.

Danielle Hall: 24:17 So here's what I wish my teacher would have done, right? This whole podcast episode is basically like, "What Danielle's eighth grade Spanish teacher should have done."

Hugh: 24:25 *laughter* Right.

Danielle Hall: 24:27 So Hugh, you wanted to talk about creating a safe space?

Hugh: 24:32 Yes. When I visit classrooms, I'm often asked why I decided to write *Torment*, and specifically why I decided to write it and promote it as a book that can be read in class for a middle school aged audience. And I think reflecting on my own experience as a student that age, I remember that the classroom was one of the places that I felt the most safe. I was around other kids that I was around every day. I had teachers that for the most part I felt I could trust, and that really cared about me, and cared about how I was feeling. And there wasn't the barrier or the pretense to the relationship with those adults that there was with my own parents or other adults that I knew in the community.

Hugh: 25:21 So being able to discuss difficult topics, heavy matters in a space that is familiar to you, when you're around people that you know you can trust, I think is very important. And we never really know what opportunities young people have to do that. And so if you can offer that sort of environment within the classroom, if you're able to do that, I think it can be really powerful. And all

of these books serve as vehicles to open up that conversation, and they can really change someone's life.

Danielle Hall: 25:52 Yeah. And part of that creating a safe space is valuing the relationship over your teaching content. And that's really tough these days. We're in an era of high stakes testing. Teachers are super accountable to get all the way through their curriculum. But there are days that little Danielle is not going to learn her Spanish vocabulary because she is shut down to that topic. And unless you value that relationship first, the content's not going to happen no matter how hard you're trying to push. And so creating a safe space is about seeing the students for what they need in that moment.

Hugh: 26:37 Excellent point.

Danielle Hall: 26:40 And one of the things that Angela Watson mentioned on her podcast episode about trauma-informed teaching was having also a literal safe space in the classroom. Okay, so she's an elementary school teacher, and this is a little bit more challenging for middle and high school classrooms. But having like a corner that if a kid goes there, you understand that you don't need to pry, but they need some time, right?

Hugh: 27:08 That's awesome.

Danielle Hall: 27:09 It doesn't all have to be in middle school bathrooms, like, you could actually make a space. And there are tons of great teachers out there who do this, and they know that down the hall, Ms. Johnson doesn't have class this period, so she will be your safe space. You can go to her. I know you like her. She'll let you cry in her classroom. She'll give you a granola bar. So I don't want to discount what people are doing, but if people haven't thought about this for their own school, there are definitely some great strategies out there.

Danielle Hall: 27:46 I also wanted to say, I know I've been very open on this episode so far ... More kids have experienced trauma than may be obvious to you, may have been disclosed to you through principals and administration, or may even occur to you because trauma can manifest in so many ways at so many moments that there's no like, poster child for having experienced trauma.

Hugh: 28:14 Right. For sure. One of the things that has been really humbling for me and a great learning experience is traveling to different middle schools around the States. The level of emotional intelligence that these students have, I feel is far beyond what I had when I was at their age. And their proclivity for conversation about these topics, I've seen them support each other in real time

with things that are kind of scary sometimes and have seen them express how they feel and how they perceive different situations with such eloquence and maturity. I think as we get older, sometimes it becomes a little bit more difficult to know what to expect from young people, but I completely agree with your point about trying to stay away from the assumptions about who has been impacted, about who can handle what because being able to engage in this way really does benefit everybody.

Danielle Hall: 29:13 Right. And that's what we're here for is to create a safe space that benefits all of our students and each of our students, and that includes loading up the classroom library with lots of stories through which our students can build empathy and self-awareness and that community awareness that we were talking about.

Hugh: 29:37 Definitely.

Danielle Hall: 29:39 That's our show for today, friends. Thank you for joining me, Hugh.

Hugh: 29:43 Thank you for having me.

Danielle Hall: 29:45 You can find Hugh on Instagram @hd_tsd. You can find us on Instagram and Twitter @yacafepodcast. We'd love to hear from you. And don't forget to grab your copy of next week's book, *In the Key of Nira Ghani* by Natasha Deen, via the link in our show notes. And if you're enjoying the show, please leave us a review on iTunes. Happy reading.