

YA Café Podcast
Episode 52: *In the Key of Nira Ghani*
18 April 2019

Amanda Thrasher: 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 *In the Key of Nira Ghani* by Natasha Deen. 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: 00:28 And I'm Danielle Hall, an eighth and ninth grade English teacher, and I blog at teachnouvelle.com.

Amanda Thrasher: 00:34 *Nira Ghani* feels like she doesn't fit in in her mostly white Canadian school. It's not just that she's Guyanese, or so poor her clothes apologize for their existence, but also that she just can't be herself. At home, she throws herself into playing trumpet, but she knows her parents would never let her join jazz band. Kids at school pick on her, her father's obnoxious brother and his family look down on her, and she doesn't want the same dreams her parents want for her. How can she be the perfect daughter they want, when her family refuses to support her passion? Dani, what did you think of this book?

Danielle Hall: 01:04 So, I liked it. I thought it was a light, fun read. I learned some stuff about music, and you weren't here to tell me these things were true, but you know, I just ... I believed in Natasha Deen's research, and then we talked to her.

Amanda Thrasher: 01:20 Which one did you not think was true, remind me? Or what did you not think was true?

Danielle Hall: 01:24 I just ... I didn't know pocket trumpets were a thing.

Amanda Thrasher: 01:27 Oh yeah.

Danielle Hall: 01:27 I assume that they're not actual, like pocket size. How big are they?

Amanda Thrasher: 01:32 They're about this big. *laughter* Is that helpful for everyone listening to the podcast? I don't know what you expected to happen there, Danielle.

Danielle Hall: 01:41 But yeah, I liked it. It was a fun read, and Natasha Deen is a fun person, and she will be joining us on our episode next week.

Amanda Thrasher: 01:50 From the future, past, I don't know.

Danielle Hall: 01:53 Days of past future.

Amanda Thrasher: 01:55 We've lost track. Anyway, yeah, I thought that this was great. I liked so many things about this. I loved Nira as a character. I thought that she was like a nice mix of cranky with her family, but really loving her family, and I really liked the way you could see that when there were outside forces against her family, she was always on her parents' side. Any time it was her father's brother being a jerk, she was always gonna be on her father's side, even though at home, she's like, "You never let me do anything."

Danielle Hall: 02:25 Right. Right. It was definitely a united front situation. So Nira's family are Guyanese immigrants, and basically, I don't know a ton of history about Guyana, but in the book, they talk about two waves of immigration, and basically Nira's father got out, but was unable to take any money with him. And so, he came to Canada dirt poor, whereas his brother came just a couple years later, got to take all of his money with him from Guyana and thus, his brother's family is a lot wealthier, and continually rubbing it in his face, even though it's clearly out of everyone's control, like how much money they have.

Amanda Thrasher: 03:08 Yeah, they go over to the uncle's house for dinner and obviously it's in the nicer neighborhood, and he's got all of the nicer things, and that really also extends to Nira's relationship with her cousin, Farah, who's also in school, but she gets to go to a private school, so she's not the only brown person in her school, so there's that disconnect there where Nira is jealous of Farah because she can have friends that look like her, even though she doesn't like Farah's friends at all.

Danielle Hall: 03:37 Farah gets to wear nicer clothes. Clothes are a big deal in this book.

Amanda Thrasher: 03:41 Yeah I had a hard time empathizing with that. I'm sure you did too.

Danielle Hall: 03:44 Yeah.

Danielle Hall: 03:45 So Nira really equates clothes with popularity and I don't know, for me, I guess there was about a six month period in middle school where I wanted better clothes but then I realized that that wasn't going to connect me to the people I really wanted to hang out with, which ended up being you, so ...

Amanda Thrasher: 04:06 And I was in trash clothes so it all worked out. *laughter*

Danielle Hall: 04:10 But yeah, it did make me uncomfortable how fixated Nira was on clothes. She sort of blamed her family for not being able to give her clothes, when it was clear that there was no money with which to buy those clothes.

Amanda Thrasher: 04:27 Yeah, I mean I think that it wasn't just she wanted a little bit nicer clothes, it was like she wanted the \$100 designer jeans or whatever, and I'm just like, "That's too many dollars, Nira."

Danielle Hall: 04:38 I definitely want to mention in this episode, because we ended up talking to Natasha Deen in the past future about Guyanese hospitality. So in this book, tea is a very big deal and becomes a symbol, but I love how Nira's grandmother is always trying to get everyone to drink tea.

Amanda Thrasher: 05:02 Yeah it was a nice detail, it made her grandmother feel like a very real character.

Danielle Hall: 05:06 Right, among other things.

Amanda Thrasher: 05:08 Among other things, her grandmother's a great character.

Danielle Hall: 05:09 Right and she has this moment where she wears this bright pink tracksuit or something, but you get the sense of exactly what pink it is. It's like grandma pink.

Amanda Thrasher: 05:21 Like fuchsia grandma pink.

Danielle Hall: 05:23 Yeah.

Amanda Thrasher: 05:23 Yeah.

Amanda Thrasher: 05:24 So one thing I wanted to talk about going back a little bit to music, so the driving force of the beginning of the novel is Nira wants to audition for jazz band at her school.

Danielle Hall: 05:35 You are making so many faces right now, I wish people could see. *laughter*

Amanda Thrasher: 05:39 I hate this band director so much.

Danielle Hall: 05:42 Okay, okay, let's slow down. So y'all, if you don't know, Amanda played trumpet in high school and college, you know, her other life.

Amanda Thrasher: 05:51 In my other life I was a music teacher.

Danielle Hall: 05:52 Yeah, so she's been a high school band director.

Amanda Thrasher: 05:55 So I've been a high school band director and so I have very strong feelings about this stupid jazz band director because the fact that he was giving such a strong barrier to entry to this jazz band was ridiculous. Like, you're an English teacher, you're not going to tell kids not to write papers if they're bad at writing papers. You're the teacher, you're the one that teaches them to write papers.

Danielle Hall: 06:16 Right and also one thing that I got caught up in was he made people who were already in it last year re-audition with exactly the same process, that seemed unnecessarily ... are they like the best band in the state or something?

Amanda Thrasher: 06:33 Even if they're the best band in the state, and I would say especially if they're the best band in the state, then you have to have another jazz band for the people who don't make the top jazz band because-

Danielle Hall: 06:42 Mm-hmm (affirmative), good point.

Amanda Thrasher: 06:42 ... if you have kids who want to learn and you're saying, "No I don't want to teach you," you're not a good teacher.

Danielle Hall: 06:48 Right, I definitely felt that too and I felt like Natasha Deen was trying to build up our empathy for him because the band director is going through some stuff.

Amanda Thrasher: 06:56 But I get the feeling that while that may be true, this is not out of character for him. This is his policy, this is how he runs his band.

Danielle Hall: 07:02 Right, he's really strict.

Amanda Thrasher: 07:04 And I think there are a lot of band directors who do it that way, who view themselves as band directors instead of music teachers and it's not great, it's a problem.

Danielle Hall: 07:11 Right. So okay, let's circle back to the pocket trumpet because this matters a lot more than me just mentioning, "Oh I learned that pocket trumpets were a thing." So Nira is, not practicing in secret, her parents gave her her pocket trumpet, whose name is George by the way.

Amanda Thrasher: 07:29 Georgia. Incidentally, also the name of my trumpet.

Danielle Hall: 07:33 Really?

Amanda Thrasher: 07:33 Yeah.

Danielle Hall: 07:34 Your trumpet is in our promotional pictures for this episode.

Amanda Thrasher: 07:38 No, that's Antony not Georgia.

Danielle Hall: 07:39 Oh, what was I thinking?

Amanda Thrasher: 07:41 Yeah of course, they're very different trumpets Danielle.

Danielle Hall: 07:44 So anyway, Nira has this pocket trumpet, which as Amanda said earlier is smaller than a regular trumpet. Because it fits in your pocket. *laughter*

Amanda Thrasher: 07:55 Yes. *laughter*

Danielle Hall: 07:58 No, obviously I know that it doesn't fit in your pocket but the whole point y'all is that Nira has a smaller, less expensive trumpet and she has all these self-esteem issues related to the size of her trumpet and the quality of performance that she feels like she'll be able to give with it, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. You can clearly see a mile away that the moral of the story is going to end up being 'it's not the size of the trumpet, it's the size of your soul', that is clear.

Amanda Thrasher: 08:32 There are very nice pocket trumpets out there. I know people who play pocket trumpets. I mean not a lot of people but it's a different sound. I think more people in jazz play it than classical.

Danielle Hall: 08:42 Right.

Amanda Thrasher: 08:42 Classically, nobody plays it.

Danielle Hall: 08:43 And one of the things she ends up learning is that great musicians have played with this trumpet in great performances.

Danielle Hall: 08:54 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 In the Key of Nira Ghani and dig a little deeper.

Danielle Hall: 09:14 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 A Tiger at Midnight, a new slow burn fantasy by Swati Teerdhala, and we have as a guest on the show, Natasha Deen so you should totally read the book. You can order this book through the link in our show notes and help us keep bringing you great content. Happy reading.

Amanda Thrasher: 09:49 Welcome back y'all. It's time for Things We Like a Latte. Danielle, what's your brew of choice this week?

Danielle Hall: 09:54 Well, Amanda.

Amanda Thrasher: 09:55 Well, Danielle.

Danielle Hall: 09:57 Season three of the Santa Clarita Diet dropped so I re-watched season two, I've seen season one two or three times at this point. I really love this show. I love the characters and the way that their relationships are defined with each other and I especially love the very specific humor that each of the characters operates with, mostly Joel. So he has this sort of frazzled, anxious, nice guy thing going on, so he's always got a smile on his face but he seems really uncomfortable most of the time and I find that hilarious. I love their marriage, I love their parenting, or their efforts to parent a child that doesn't want to be parented.

Amanda Thrasher: 10:47 Their parenting is my favorite, *laughter* just how badly it always goes.

Danielle Hall: 10:51 And I just really like the show, Santa Clarita Diet. How about you Amanda? What's your brew of choice?

Amanda Thrasher: 10:59 So I just got home from training, which is great and when I came home, I came home to my Nintendo Switch and my Nintendo Switch has on it Tetris 99, which is a new Battle Royale game that just came out for Switch, where 99 people start playing Tetris and only one person wins and it's the greatest thing in the whole world, I only want to play that from now on. I just want that to be my new religion, occupation and hobby. *laughter* I'm just trying to figure out how to work in getting a paycheck with that but I love it, it's so much fun.

Danielle Hall: 11:33 I'm sure you could do it.

Amanda Thrasher: 11:33 If you like Tetris, it's the thing.

Danielle Hall: 11:35 There are people that get paid to play Fortnite.

Amanda Thrasher: 11:37 Oh yeah but they're a lot prettier, better, or funnier than I am. *laughter*

Danielle Hall: 11:42 We're going to take a quick break and when we come back, we'll return to our discussion on In the Key of Nira Ghani. The rest of this 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: 12:12 Welcome back y'all to the YA Café. We're continuing our discussion on In the Key of Nira Ghani by Natasha Deen. If you haven't read this yet we want to warn you again that this segment will contain spoilers.

Danielle Hall: 12:22 Spoilers.

Amanda Thrasher: 12:23 All right.

Danielle Hall: 12:24 So since we did not spell it out in the first part of our episode, but we talked about the jerk band director, I thought that this was such an interesting choice that she doesn't actually make it into the jazz band.

Amanda Thrasher: 12:36 I agree, I really liked that.

Danielle Hall: 12:38 I didn't see it coming and I liked that she didn't make it into the jazz band because she hesitated and we said he was strict and a terrible teacher, but she gets up there and she hesitates and he has no patience and dismisses her.

Amanda Thrasher: 12:57 After making her audition in front of everybody, which is a whole nother thing. Anyways, I'm going to stop ripping into this band director now but-

Danielle Hall: 13:04 He's a fictional band director.

Amanda Thrasher: 13:05 ... I'm mad at him! *laughter*

Danielle Hall: 13:07 But she doesn't make it in the jazz band and she has to decide, what does this mean for her? Is the jazz band the only way that she can have her passion actualized or whatever. And she decides no and starts playing at clubs and I thought this was so cool.

Amanda Thrasher: 13:29 Yeah I agree, I thought it was great, it was a really great choice to have her want this badly enough to not only fight with her parents for permission, when that fall through, find another avenue against their wishes, going and playing in these clubs, yeah I thought it was great.

Danielle Hall: 13:45 She's tenacious, for sure.

Amanda Thrasher: 13:47 She's very tenacious.

Danielle Hall: 13:48 And we didn't really mention this but she had to get a job at a music store to save up money to rent the trumpet if she was going to be in jazz band, blah, blah, blah, so she had that too. So she definitely overcame a lot of things and then went her own way. How did you feel Amanda, about the descriptions of playing the trumpet?

Amanda Thrasher: 14:13 I thought it was fine. I mean I think that it's very difficult to write about playing music because it's the only thing, that's why there's music, nothing else fills that gap.

Danielle Hall: 14:21 I thought that Natasha Deen's writing about music was very different from other books about musicians that we've read.

Amanda Thrasher: 14:28 I think that it's super clear in this book how much Nira loves music and is working for it and feels passionate about it. I think that really shone through.

Danielle Hall: 14:38 Yeah, I agree, it shone through and we talk a lot about protagonists who are supposedly good at things but never practice but she is a person who practices.

Amanda Thrasher: 14:50 Yeah, you got to practice. The biggest thing that caught me was when she was like, "I'm just going to leave and go practice, and other things are going to happen in the house." I'm like, "No, nothing else is happening in that house, no one else can hear each other, there's a trumpet practicing."

Danielle Hall: 15:06 I thought about that too.

Amanda Thrasher: 15:07 Because you've been in a house where a trumpet has been practicing.

Danielle Hall: 15:10 I have. *laughter* Okay, so plenty of other things I loved about this book that I want to talk about but first, I want to talk about something I did not love. I do not like when secondary characters in books tell the protagonist all the time how great they are. Like, Farah being like, "You're better than me. You're the best one of us, you're so great, you're so sweet, you're so kind, you're so smart."

Amanda Thrasher: 15:38 See, I took that differently.

Danielle Hall: 15:40 How did you take it?

Amanda Thrasher: 15:41 I took at as being less about Nira and more about Farah, because Farah has to deal with her lousy philandering father and her shade of a mother and trying to have some sense of self and identity means that she strikes out and smokes and does all these kinds of things because she has fundamentally low self-esteem, so it makes sense that she, even though she strives hard to be perfect in a lot of ways, she makes the best grades and blah, blah, blah, she also sees Nira as a more authentic person and thinks that that is a good quality.

Danielle Hall: 16:19 Sure, I can understand that, but she is not the only one who tells Nira how good she is.

Amanda Thrasher: 16:24 I don't remember other people telling her but I believe you.

Danielle Hall: 16:26 The dude, right? Noah, whatever his name was. Her LI, the dude, you know? I don't remember dude's names, it's a thing.

Amanda Thrasher: 16:38 I'm pretty sure it's Noah.

Danielle Hall: 16:40 The love interest, he told her how great she was but I guess that's part of the gig. I love the grandmother navigating between her two granddaughters, I loved that. I loved that Farah was not the bad guy the whole time. When they went over to that dinner the first time and everybody was ganging up on Nira and her mother and I was like, "Oh God, this is going to be one of those where Farah's going to be terrible the whole time and that's going to be Nira's main obstacle to anything." It ended up not being like that, I really enjoyed that.

Amanda Thrasher: 17:12 I really enjoyed that too, I liked the character of Farah a lot.

Danielle Hall: 17:15 Me too. One small detail in this book that I liked and felt very seen by, Nira starts acting weird because she's going and playing jazz behind everyone's back so she's being cagey and is a bad

liar or whatever and people can see through her and they can see that something's going on. Everybody asks, "Is it a boy, or is it a girl?" Like, "Is it a boy problem, or a girl problem?" Just very naturally not assuming about her. Love that.

Amanda Thrasher: 17:50 I liked that too. So I also thought that Nira's relationship with her best friend was interesting and I wish there had been a little more of it, versus it mostly being defined by its absence.

Danielle Hall: 18:03 Yes and this is another one of those moments where we have to ... well we don't have to speculate, but this is another one of those moments where I speculated how much relationship there might have been in previous versions of this book.

Amanda Thrasher: 18:20 Maybe. I think that it felt pretty obvious to me that Emily and Mack were dating.

Amanda Thrasher: 18:25 From the beginning.

Amanda Thrasher: 18:26 Yeah and I also feel like Emily was not really great to Nira about dealing with that. Nira had some really strong reasons to dislike Mackenzie-

Amanda Thrasher: 18:39 Right

Danielle Hall: 18:40 ... which were not related to sexuality.

Amanda Thrasher: 18:41 No, of course not. But Nira had a lot of good reasons to not like Mackenzie and I don't feel like Emily was ever a very good medium of ... Emily never said, "She just gets really nervous around you, she doesn't mean to say these things, they just come out really wrong."

Danielle Hall: 18:57 Right, she stuck more with, "She's nice when you get to know her."

Amanda Thrasher: 19:02 Which is the textbook thing that people say about lousy people ...

Danielle Hall: 19:06 Right and it's ignoring Nira's very real criticisms of Mackenzie.

Amanda Thrasher: 19:11 Yeah and sure, Mackenzie was just buffooning around, she did not mean to do harm but she still did do harm. She apologized for it but it could have all been a lot easier if Emily had been more proactive.

Danielle Hall: 19:25 Right and when we say do harm, Mackenzie says several racist things over the course of the book.

Amanda Thrasher: 19:32 Yes but I did like how later Mackenzie talked to her and was like, "I don't mean to say racist things. I just get so nervous, you're so intimidating." I really liked that interaction.

Danielle Hall: 19:45 She came over and apologized privately so it wasn't like, "I'm apologizing because Emily's making me."

Amanda Thrasher: 19:54 And it wasn't like, "I'm sorry you took this the wrong way." I feel like that was key. Her apology put nothing on Nira. Her apology was all just like, "I'm dumb, I'm sorry, I don't mean to be dumb, I'm trying not to be dumb."

Danielle Hall: 20:09 Right, I agree.

Danielle Hall: 20:11 So I really like Nira's relationship with her parents over the course of the book and just basically her trying to understand their experiences as they also try to understand her current experience and her dreams and things like that. This kind of manifests itself at two really great moments where her mother buys for her father this small barbecue and he hates it because it's small, smaller than his brother's, right? We talked about that dinner scene and he just gets so baffled by this small barbecue which of course is like the small trumpet and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. But her mother was trying to provide something ... like an acceptable substitute and at this other moment, Nira goes to a consignment shop and she finally gets all the nice clothes she wanted because that's so important to her and she brings them home and her dad throws them away and it's this whole big scene and what I really liked about this scene was it's very clear to us, and very clear to Nira, that there's something else going on here because he completely, "overreacts," in quotation marks, about these clothes.

Danielle Hall: 21:33 It turns out that he does not like them because they are second-hand clothes and when he was little, all he had was second-hand clothes and he swore to himself that when they came to Canada, it would be to make their own life and not accept it second-hand. So the clothes become symbolic and Nira gets insight into her family's experience but then,

Amanda Thrasher: 22:00 ... then he does. He does get the clothes out of the trash and washes them and folds them and I thought that was a really sweet concession on his part after he was so emotional and blew up at her. Obviously it's not great that that kind of explosion happened and clearly Nira is hurt and baffled by the whole situation but that then he worked to make it right, even if he wasn't willing to talk about it or apologize, I thought was a really good insight in his character.

Danielle Hall: 22:29 Yeah there were many sweet moments in this book and overall I thought it was a fun read with many great characters and relationships and stuff as symbols, so that was great.

Amanda Thrasher: 22:41 Your English teacher heart smiled on that one?

Danielle Hall: 22:42 Yeah, it will be great in a classroom library.

Amanda Thrasher: 22:47 That's our show for today friends, you can find us on Instagram and Twitter @YACafePodcast. We'd love to hear from you. Don't forget to grab your copy of next week's book, *A Tiger at Midnight* by Swati Teerdhala via the link in our show notes and if you're enjoying this show, leave us a review on iTunes. Happy reading.