

YA Café Podcast
Episode 55: *With the Fire on High*
9 May 2019

Danielle Hall: 00:00 Welcome to the YA Café where we share conversations about books for teachers, readers, and caffeine addicts every where. On today's episode, we'll be talking about *With the Fire on High* by Elizabeth Acevedo. Grab a mug of your favorite beverage, friends, and let's talk books.

Danielle Hall: 00:21 Hey friends, it's Danielle. Do you want to support this podcast and check out the new book? Audible is offering YA Café listeners a free audio book download and a free 30 day trial to give you the opportunity to check out their service. Elizabeth Acevedo narrates the audio book for *With the Fire on High* so it's truly an incredible listening experience. We had the opportunity to hear her read at the PDX BookFest and I could listen to her all day long. And now you can too! To download your free audiobook today, go to audibletrial.com/yacafe.

Amanda Thrasher: 00:59 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: 01:06 And I'm Danielle Hall, an eighth and ninth grade English teacher and I blog at teachnouvelle.com. And our guest today, returning to the show is Bookstagrammer Anna from [@never_without_a_book](https://twitter.com/never_without_a_book). Hi, Anna.

Anna: 01:18 Hi.

Danielle Hall: 01:19 Thank you for joining us.

Anna: 01:21 Thank you for having me.

Danielle Hall: 01:22 This is a book where no children die.

Anna: 01:25 That's good.

Amanda Thrasher: 01:27 It's been a minute for that, right? Great job us.

Danielle Hall: 01:30 I feel like every time we invite Anna we're like, "Anna, come talk about being sad."

Anna: 01:34 Right. I get all the sad books.

Danielle Hall: 01:36 Yes but not today.

Amanda Thrasher: 01:39 Since getting pregnant at 14 Emoni has done everything she could for her daughter and her Abuela. Between, being a full time mom and a full time student, Emoni doesn't have time to think about her future. She loves cooking and people say her food is magic, but can she really squeeze in more school? Shouldn't she get a job instead? When her school offers a culinary elective with an immersion trip to Spain in the spring, it feels like a dream to Emoni. Can she find a way to let her talent shine and still keep her family afloat?

Danielle Hall: 02:08 We'll find out.

Amanda Thrasher: 02:09 Danielle, what did you think?

Danielle Hall: 02:11 I mean, I loved it. *laughter*

Amanda Thrasher: 02:13 Right?

Danielle Hall: 02:15 Okay so first of all, I feel like I should say *The Poet X* is an amazing book. It was Elizabeth Acevedo's first novel, she won the National Book Award for it, it is a book in verse. I love poetry, I loved *The Poet X*, I thought this one would be in verse, because Elizabeth Acevedo is such a talented poet. It wasn't in verse, but it was still hugely poetic, and I just loved it so much. I'm smiling so much right now. How 'bout you Anna? I know you were really looking forward to this one.

Anna: 02:45 Yes, I actually agree with you. I thought this book was gonna be in verse as well, and it was just a surprise that it wasn't, but either way it still worked out. I loved it, absolutely loved it.

Amanda Thrasher: 02:55 I agree. I also loved it so clearly were not gonna be doing too much fighting on this episode. *laughter* I just thought that her writing was so wonderful. It reads like so effortlessly, still with this very lyrical touch, but in a very easy way that just feels like you are sitting down and having a conversation with Emoni about her life, and just getting this insight into her world. And her story and her writing is so perfect.

Danielle Hall: 03:25 And she's such a strong character, like, she's so mature, and she fights for herself, and she fights for her family. I love her.

Amanda Thrasher: 03:36 I definitely agree with you on her maturity. There are a lot of times where Emoni gets sass thrown at her by various lousy characters, and she just takes the high road every time. I don't know how you do that. How do you just take the high road when people are lousy to you? *laughter* And I like the moments when she does stand up for herself, but where she just focus' her energy on what's best for her daughter, what's best for her family. That is always her barometer of what her reaction should be is 'How is this going to effect my daughter?' And I was just very impressed by her.

Danielle Hall: 04:15 And I knew that we would be talking to Anna about this book. And Anna has a daughter, which we don't, so like ... *laughter*

Anna: 04:24 I didn't expect Elizabeth to write about teen pregnancy. I don't read a lot of YA so when I read that this young girl had to grow up really fast, 14 years old having a baby. I mean she's doing the adult thing, she's got a job, she's staying in school. I don't know, this book just really shocked me, maybe that why I really love it so much.

Danielle Hall: 04:45 I was surprised too. I feel like I read stuff where the story is the pregnancy. That's the hurdle to overcome is being pregnant and being a teenager. Or finding out you're pregnant and deciding to end the pregnancy. But in this novel, Emoni chose to have the baby, and she is fiercely proud of Emma. And, like Amanda, sometimes there's sass thrown at here and there's opportunities for her to maybe deny the fact that she has a baby, or feel resentful of the baby and she is like 'No, I love this child, and she is absolutely a part of my life and I'm not gonna hide that, or be ashamed of that.' I loved that.

Danielle Hall: 05:28 We should talk about some other characters, 'cause there are some.

Amanda Thrasher: 05:33 Well we could talk some about the general lousiness of guys in Emoni's life.

Anna: 05:41 Yeah

Amanda Thrasher: 05:41 She is raise by her Abuela, because her father left after her mother died. Just didn't wanna take care of her, didn't wanna live this life.

Danielle Hall: 05:50 Lives in Puerto Rico.

Danielle Hall: 05:52 Yeah, and in addition to her absent father, her child has a quasi-absent father. He has some visitation but its not a lot.

Amanda Thrasher: 06:03 I thought that her relationship with her father was really interesting. And I thought also Tyrone's character was interesting because both of them are aggressively mediocre parents. *laughter* But they are doing that bare little minimum that means that society thinks they're like pretty decent dads. The fact that Tyrone sees his daughter every other weekend, and according to the rules of our world, that makes him a stand up guy with regards this baby, is telling.

Anna: 06:39 He came across as the typical ... he's in his daughters life just enough to call himself a dad. That's really it.

Amanda Thrasher: 06:47 I think that's what it is, right?

Anna: 06:49 Yeah.

Amanda Thrasher: 06:50 He just is checking the box.

Danielle Hall: 06:53 I was really fascinated by Emoni's father because he is not a bad dude, he is a bad father. In Puerto Rico, he's a community organizer, and he supports people, and he raises money for kids basketball teams to have uniforms, and all of these things, and recovery after the storm, and he's just really focused on the island, and we have the sense that Puerto Rico is getting this dudes best self, and there is not anything left for Emoni.

Amanda Thrasher: 07:28 Yeah, I agree. And I really just don't understand. I mean obviously you understand because people make selfish choices. But he and Emoni's Abuela talk about how he's so connected to and loves the island, he could never stay in Philadelphia, Blah, Blah, Blah. But there's no rule that Emoni had to stay in Philadelphia. If he wanted to be a father and didn't want to live in Philly, there's a pretty clear option here.

Anna: 07:54 Yeah, I thought he was a jerk. *laughter* I feel like the island is his child. He'll do anything for the island, he'll support the people, do all the stuff for them, but his own flesh and blood, he can't deal. He can't hang. And to me that's just a dead beat dad.

Danielle Hall: 08:11 Yeah. Emoni's mother died in childbirth and there's the whole 'well maybe he's just sad that his wife died.' And I'm like 'Yeah, but like, your kid.'

Anna: 08:22 Right, she didn't ask to be here.

Amanda Thrasher: 08:24 Yep

Anna: 08:24 I don't know, I felt like maybe if there was a little bit more back story, I could judge him better. Not that I judge people, but ...

Amanda Thrasher: 08:31 Oh I judge people. That's what I'm here for. *laughter*

Danielle Hall: 08:34 Anna, do you mean you could have been more on his side if there had been more back story?

Anna: 08:39 Maybe more sympathy. Because his wife dies while giving birth to their child, so maybe he's blaming her for his wife's death.

Danielle Hall: 08:48 Hmm

Amanda Thrasher: 08:49 Like a Tywin/Tyrion situation?

Anna: 08:51 Yeah. So maybe that's why he can't connect with her. That's why he's okay to go to Puerto Rico and leave her with her grandmother. I don't know.

Danielle Hall: 09:01 Yeah, I don't know either, I think, it was obviously a very intentional crafting, because he has the capacity to be supportive, just not to Emoni. I loved that aspect. It wasn't a like, deadbeat dad that is dead-beating around, like, he's a good dude just not in her family.

Amanda Thrasher: 09:25 Well I think the most telling descriptions for me were the times when Emoni was talking about Julio, her father, is in town. And talks about him filling up the space in the house and filling up space in her heart, and being present and being wonderful when he's there. And then when he's gone there are all these new holes where he was. I thought that was so beautiful and so well said about the way that some people can just carve out space inside you and then leave.

Anna: 09:54 Very true.

Danielle Hall: 09:55 That's so sad.

Amanda Thrasher: 09:57 It was sad!

Danielle Hall: 10:01 All right so we also have Abuela, who's just 'Buela in this novel. And like we said, Emoni's father lives in Puerto Rico, so Abuela is from Puerto Rico. And so Emoni has family in North Carolina on her mother's side, and then in Puerto Rico. And one of the things that I thought was really cool

about this book, besides reminiscing about Puerto Rican cuisine, was the conversations about race and culture and people assuming things about Emoni based on her name, and her level of speaking Spanish. I thought that that was really interesting. What did you think about that Anna?

Anna: 10:43 I'd have to agree with you. I mean, I'm Haitian-American so I understood when her grandmother was saying that because I've had that happen to me and my siblings. So for me, I liked that part.

Amanda Thrasher: 10:56 I really like the sense of place I got in Philly, so I don't know if it said it on the first couple pages or not where we actually were. But then somebody addresses something as 'jawn' and I was like 'Oh, I guess we're in Philly!' *laughter*

Danielle Hall: 11:10 So in addition to having lived in Puerto Rico, we also lived in Philadelphia so this was like...

Amanda Thrasher: 11:16 Yeah, so I thought her sense of Philly was really good.

Danielle Hall: 11:20 Yeah! They mention things that are real like, Temple and Drexel and water ice, which is really like, the thing.

Amanda Thrasher: 11:28 Yeah the water ice was another one where I was like 'Oh, okay.'

Anna: 11:30 Yeah that was all foreign to me, I was like 'Where?' *laughter*

Danielle Hall: 11:33 Maybe she went to Philly and had water ice

Amanda Thrasher: 11:37 and heard somebody say 'jawn' and was like 'What is this word? What does it mean?' And they said 'It means literally everything' and she was like 'Okay.' *laughter*

Danielle Hall: 11:45 So, I had never ever seen that word written down before. So, when you hear it you think like 'John' the name, but its J-A-W-N. And it stands for like anything. Like 'hand me that jawn over there.'

Amanda Thrasher: 12:00 Like its basically just means like thing.

Danielle Hall: 12:01 Thingamabob.

Anna: 12:03 Interesting. Have you guys read Like Water For Chocolate?

Danielle Hall: 12:07 I haven't. Tell us about it.

Anna: 12:09 Well, Like Water For Chocolate, each chapter it starts with a recipe.

Danielle Hall: 12:14 *gasp*

Anna: 12:14 Yeah, so I got that vibe from this book. I was like 'Ooh, I like it.'

Amanda Thrasher: 12:19 Oh yeah, that's a good point. We should talk about the food because I think the food is done so well in this book.

Danielle Hall: 12:25 Anna do you cook?

Anna: 12:26 I, uhhhhh, yes? *laughter* Because I have to. But I'm no chef, that's for sure. *laughter*

Danielle Hall: 12:35 Do you have a culinary tradition in your family?

Anna: 12:39 Rice and beans. Fried plantains, that's the Haitian thing.

Anna: 12:44 Right

Anna: 12:44 Me personally? It's whatever's quick.

Danielle Hall: 12:49 I wanted to try some of these recipes. Like this very first one which is called 'Emoni's when life gives you lemons make Lemon Verbena Tembleque' recipe. I really wanna try that. Even Strawberry Milk, and I don't even like milk. *laughter*

Amanda Thrasher: 13:07 Well, if you feel so led to make any of them, I will sacrifice myself as the taste tester. To let you know if I feel magic from it. So you should start now.

Danielle Hall: 13:20 We'll make that happen. More about food and magic and memory and other stuff when we come back. We're gonna take our first break, then we'll share about 'Things We Like a Latte.' And we'll return to our discussion of With The Fire On High and dig a little deeper.

Amanda Thrasher: 13:45 Hey y'all. Are you looking for an easy way to support this podcast? Order our book choices through the affiliate link in our show notes. You'll be supporting our authors, and making sure we get a small kickback to keep our show going. Next episode we'll be discussing *These Witches Don't Burn* by Isabel Sterling. And we'll be joined by author and editor Jessica Spotswood. If you'd like to help us keep bringing you great content, order through the link in our show notes. Happy reading.

Amanda Thrasher: 14:21 Welcome back y'all. Its time for 'Things We Like a Latte.' Danielle, what's your brew of choice this week.

Danielle Hall: 14:26 I'm gonna anticipate a Thing I Like a Latte that's happening this weekend.

Amanda Thrasher: 14:31 But what if it sucks though?

Danielle Hall: 14:32 It's gonna be awesome.

Amanda Thrasher: 14:33 You don't know that.

Danielle Hall: 14:34 I do know that. So, this weekend I'm going to YALLWest, which is the west coast equivalent of YALLFest. It's a bookcon, I'm gonna see lots of awesome people like Angie Thomas and Somaiya Daud who was on this podcast.

Amanda Thrasher: 14:52 Somaiya Daud!

Danielle Hall: 14:54 Yeah! Uh, Tomi Adeyemi, and I'm gonna see Claire who joined us for The Forest Queen and Stay Sweet. And Claire and I, she probably doesn't know this yet, are gonna go to The Salt and Straw which is the ice cream place that inspired the ice cream flavor in Stay Sweet. Basically its a whole YA Café Podcast thing.

Amanda Thrasher: 15:16 That sounds great. I hope its wonderful for you.

Danielle Hall: 15:19 I'll eat some ice cream on your behalf.

Amanda Thrasher: 15:21 Thank you. I'll be here, ice cream-less. *laughter*

Anna: 15:27 So, come June first, I believe it is June first, I am heading to New York for the first time ever in life. And I'm going to attend Bookcon for the weekend. I'm excited.

Danielle Hall: 15:38 That's gonna be so great!

Anna: 15:39 Yes, so I got my bags packed, I got my money ready.

Danielle Hall: 15:43 Do you have an empty suitcase for all the books you're gonna get?

Anna: 15:46 Yes. My daughter thinks I'm weird, I'm just like 'No, you gotta understand, priority is my books. So I got my suitcase ready for that.'

Danielle Hall: 15:53 How bout you Anna? What's your brew of choice?

Anna: 15:56 Currently I just tapped into a new show called American Gods, and I've been binge watching for the past two days. So I haven't read a book in two days, but I am loving this show like its sucked me in, like can't get enough.

Danielle Hall: 16:10 And its based on a book so that counts, right?

Amanda Thrasher: 16:12 Yeah, that counts as reading. Pretty sure

Anna: 16:14 There you go, perfect.

Danielle Hall: 16:16 How bout you Amanda? What's your brew of choice? Is it the espresso maker we just bought?

Amanda Thrasher: 16:21 No, but that would have been good though. So this is a show that I think I have talked about on the podcast before because I love it unreasonably and I wanna snuggle it and stay inside it forever. Its called Crazy Ex-Girlfriend. Season 4, the final season just dropped on Netflix and I watched it all and it's just perfect and heartbreaking and I love all of these characters and I feel so warmly towards everyone who was involved in making this wonderful little show. Now that its done, if you are a person who doesn't like to start things until they're finished because you got burned by

Danielle Hall: 16:55 Firefly

Amanda Thrasher: 16:56 or Winds of Winter or whatever it may be. This show is such a delight. Its a musical comedy, aired on the CW, and its all on Netflix streaming. Crazy Ex-Girlfriend. I love it so much.

Danielle Hall: 17:08 We're going to take a quick break and when we come back we'll return to our discussion on The Fire on High. 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: 17:39 Welcome back y'all to the YA Café. We're continuing our discussion on With the Fire on High by Elizabeth Acevedo. If you haven't read this yet, we want to warn you again that this segment will contain spoilers.

Amanda Thrasher: 17:50 Spoilers!

Anna: 17:52 Spoilers. *laughter*

Danielle Hall: 17:58 Yes!

Anna: 17:58 I always wanted to do that! *laughter*

Amanda Thrasher: 18:02 So jumping into our spoilers, you wrote down Chef Ayden the culinary class chef, about how strict he is. Did you want to talk about that?

Danielle Hall: 18:13 Yes, so we didn't really talk about this at all in the spoiler-free section. We mentioned the recipes and the food thing. But food is really central to this novel. And she takes this class and it has the immersion trip in the spring. I mean, I guess we said that in the summary. I really enjoyed this because Emoni kind of cooks from instinct and her hands are drawn to various spices and her 'Buena calls it magic and her friends call it magic and she doesn't call it magic but she tries things and she learns through doing. And so when she comes into this cooking class she's super excited to have outside validation and basically the first the chef does is like 'No you must follow the recipe. I can't grade you on your creativity.'

Amanda Thrasher: 19:04 Right. I thought it was great. Because if she wanted to be a successful restaurant owner, that's very different from being a very good cook. Yeah know?

Danielle Hall: 19:10 Yeah

Amanda Thrasher: 19:12 So I thought it was good to kinda force her to learn this new language of cooking.

Anna: 19:17 Right I think that with that structure it helps her.

Amanda Thrasher: 19:22 Definitely, like it definitely helps her with food safety and all that stuff. 'cause that's not necessarily a thing that can be instinctual.

Anna: 19:28 Right

Amanda Thrasher: 19:29 So this is probably the only book we've read on the YA Café podcast, that I would not be annoyed if it was billed to me as magical realism. And it wasn't. *laughter* Because it really is, there's this one magical element in the book that just brushes against the edge of reality, where Emoni's food makes people cry, makes them have these memories that are unrelated to a food memory. And it was a really beautiful detail. I really enjoyed it.

Anna: 19:57 Yeah, it definitely gave me the Like Water For Chocolate Vibe 'cause that's how it was in that book as well. The food gave people emotions.

Danielle Hall: 20:05 Well that's cool. I'm gonna have to check out this book. I like food books.

Anna: 20:11 It's one of my favorite classics, and of course there is a movie. So its definitely worth the read.

Amanda Thrasher: 20:16 Is the movie Chocolat? Or is that a different thing?

Anna: 20:19 That's a different thing.

Danielle Hall: 20:21 So then they take this trip to Spain, and I liked that this happened. So, I was surprised that this book covered the whole school year. It was quite ambitious in terms of time line.

Amanda Thrasher: 20:35 Yeah!

Danielle Hall: 20:35 And so she actually gets to go to Spain. The immersion program is super cool, where they all have a cook that they could apprentice for.

Amanda Thrasher: 20:46 Very immersive.

Danielle Hall: 20:47 Yeah, I'm like 'I need to teach foreign language, and think of a cool immersion program like this.'

Danielle Hall: 20:56 All right should we talk about the boy?

Amanda Thrasher: 20:59 If we must. *laughter*

Danielle Hall: 21:04 Before we talk about the boy, which I think we must. There is a queer character in this novel. It is Angelica, her best friend. Angelica was super cool.

Anna: 21:16 Love her.

Amanda Thrasher: 21:17 Yeah, she was great. She was a good 'YA Best Friend TM'.

Danielle Hall: 21:21 Oh, see I thought she really transcended the TM.

Amanda Thrasher: 21:24 Oh I do not think she transcended the TM. But I liked her. And I liked her friendship with Emoni. But she had no personal arc, she had no change or development as a character,

Danielle Hall: 21:35 Mmm, that's true.

Amanda Thrasher: 21:35 she had no real relationships outside of Emoni.

Danielle Hall: 21:38 She had Laura.

Amanda Thrasher: 21:40 Yeah but we never saw her with Laura.

Danielle Hall: 21:42 Oh that's true we never met Laura.

Anna: 21:44 No. She spoke about Laura but we never met her.

Amanda Thrasher: 21:48 And then that was really all earlier in the book. Towards the end of the book, Angelica was barely a character. But I liked Angelica. And I'm not busting on this choice in the book. I don't think that Angelica was a major character, I think that she was very much just a-

Anna: 22:02 The sidekick.

Amanda Thrasher: 22:02 Yeah.

Danielle Hall: 22:03 Yeah. I guess that's true. She had much less the role in the novel than say, any of Simon's friends.

Amanda Thrasher: 22:10 Right

Anna: 22:10 Right

Amanda Thrasher: 22:12 All right, so boy. He's a good boy, I mean, as boys go he was sweet. What did y'all think of him?

Anna: 22:18 Like you, he's fine. I mean, I wasn't impressed by him. But I mean overall I thought he worked out. He's just a boy.

Danielle Hall: 22:28 What would've made him impressive to you?

Anna: 22:30 Um ...

Amanda Thrasher: 22:30 *laughter* That's how I feel about boys too.

Anna: 22:38 *laughter* I don't know, I just thought he was ... based off of her previous relationships obviously he was better but, he was just a boy, you know. Nothing special.

Amanda Thrasher: 22:45 Yeah, I thought he was a good sweet, high school romance. And like, wasn't a jerk. Which is still kind of like, uh ...

Danielle Hall: 22:57 #goodenough. Just not being a jerk being the bare minimum.

Amanda Thrasher: 23:00 Right, I feel like a lot of times the love interest in YA books is like, 'not a jerk.' And that's their defining characteristic. *laughter*

Anna: 23:10 Yeah

Amanda Thrasher: 23:10 Sorry, I feel like Malachi was like, 'not a jerk' and that was his defining characteristic. Like, I'm not impressed that you're okay with taking things slow. Like, "okay???".

Danielle Hall: 23:22 I agree, he wasn't impressive to me either. And I would say that reading this novel, he is the thing that I wanted less of.

Amanda Thrasher: 23:33 I feel like his importance had a lot less to do with him and a lot more to do with Emoni. Because he was definitely a thing in Emoni's life that had nothing to do with making a better life and future for her daughter. He was just like a fun boy to date in high school. And Emoni deserved that. She was a mom and a student and working and all of these kinds of things, but she's still a high schooler and she still deserved a fine, just fine, boyfriend.

Anna: 24:02 Yeah, I mean I agree with that. I'm not a big fan of romance. And I know YA books usually go over the top with romance and I just felt like he didn't overshadow her strength as a woman. So I don't know, it just worked for me.

Danielle Hall: 24:18 It worked for me too. I wouldn't have wanted more romance in this novel.

Amanda Thrasher: 24:22 Oh no. *laughter*

Amanda Thrasher: 24:27 It was like my upper limit. I was like, "Alright I'm here for this, I guess."

Anna: 24:32 Yeah, she gave us just enough to not be grossed out. *laughter*

Danielle Hall: 24:36 It's like a finely tuned recipe.

Anna: 24:40 Yeah

Danielle Hall: 24:40 Literature is cooking and cooking is magic.

Anna: 24:45 So the chapters were really short. I thought it worked out perfect. I really flew through the book within a day, a couple hours.

Amanda Thrasher: 24:52 It did feel short, I think. I think maybe it felt short because of, to circle back to the very first thing I said, it is so conversational and lyrical and easy to read and love. And I think it felt like a very short very quick read and I think I'm gonna re-read it. I feel like this is a book I'd like to stay with for some more time.

Danielle Hall: 25:15 Or listen to the audio book of?

Anna: 25:17 I was just about to say, listen to the audio.

Amanda Thrasher: 25:20 Maybe, maybe this will be the book that makes audiobooks more tolerable for me.

Danielle Hall: 25:25 I feel like you're never gonna get a better narrator than Elizabeth Acevedo.

Anna: 25:29 Yes, I agree.

Danielle Hall: 25:31 That's our show for today friends. Thank you so much for joining us Anna.

Anna: 25:35 Thank you for having me!

Danielle Hall: 25:36 You can find Anna on Instagram a@never_without_a_book. You can find us @YACafePodcast. We'd love to hear from you. And can you just take a second and give us a review on iTunes? Happy reading!