

YA Café Podcast
Episode 57: Tell Me How You Really Feel
13 June 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, tell Me How You Really Feel by Aminah Mae Safi.
- Danielle: 00:12 Grab a mug of your favorite beverage, friends, and let's talk books.
- Amanda : 00:15 Welcome ya'll. 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: 00:29 And I'm Danielle Hall, an eighth and ninth grade English teacher and I blog at teachnouvelle.com. And our guest today is author, Justina Chen.
- Danielle: 00:37 Hi, Justina.
- Justina Chen: 00:39 Hey, how are you guys?
- Danielle: 00:41 We are so good.
- Amanda : 00:42 We're so happy you're here.
- Justina Chen: 00:44 Oh, I'm so honored to be here.
- Danielle: 00:47 For listeners who don't know, we featured your fabulous book, Lovely, Dark, and Deep, last year. Could you tell our new listeners a little about the book?

- Justina Chen: 00:55 First of all, it was amazing, your analysis of that book. I learned things about my book myself listening to you guys. I loved it. But in all honesty, that book is the love letter to my best friend in the world, Lorianne Grover. She's also a YA author. She has six autoimmune diseases, and one of these has left her with this extreme photosensitivity. So she's actually allergic to the sun, the sun attacks her skin.
- Justina Chen: 01:26 So, I was given this idea, and I thought to myself, "Oh my gosh, what would happen to a young woman who all of a sudden becomes allergic to the sun? And how would that completely impact and shift their life? And how would that change all of their dreams and their plans?" So, this really is kind of love note for Lorianne, because she just lives so incredibly joyously, even with so much pain in her life.
- Danielle: 01:58 That's so sweet.
- Amanda : 02:00 That's an incredible tribute, because I think you've really delved into how to live a full life with this disorder that Viola develops. Yeah, I think it was just really incredibly well done. Hearing that this is for your friend just makes it that much more touching.
- Justina Chen: 02:16 I'm so glad, because you know, for me, going through life, I've met so many people who see any kind of tragedy that's happened to them as this full stop period. But the truth of the matter is, there's so much goodness to life, and I truly believe that we need to learn how to take those full stop periods and transform them into ellipses, right? Dot, dot, dot. That's what this whole book is about. How do you become an ellipses and move forward?
- Danielle: 02:43 That is such an amazing tribute. I have nothing but good things to say about this book, and I said them all in our episode. So pretty much everybody should go read that book and then listen to our episode.
- Amanda : 02:54 Correct.
- Danielle: 02:55 So, you've also written several other books, including a guide for corporations and organizations. It's called *The Art of Inspiration: Lead Your Best Story*. Now I haven't read it, so I must know, how does this stack up against Viola's parents' book? They have this organizational handbook, so that's what it made me think of.

Justina Chen: 03:18 Yes, you've caught me. *laughter* In my other life, in addition to being a YA author, I have this amazing privilege to be able to work with leaders all around the world on telling their very best story. These are all leaders who have such incredible potential to be major change makers for our world. So I only work with leaders who really want to create a better place for everybody, and I mean everybody.

Justina Chen: 03:46 So I wrote them their love letter, *The Art of Inspiration*, and how they could tell the best story to inspire others to make that positive change. So yes, oftentimes I will be called in, and yes, like Viola's parents, I have been known to do some crisis management.

Danielle: 04:05 I love it. *laughter* I'm totally going to read that book.

Justina Chen: 04:10 Oh my gosh.

Justina Chen: 04:11 And then I was just so happy to find out that *North of Beautiful*, this is probably my most well known book. It is going in for a whole 10th anniversary makeover by the publisher. So they're updating the cover, there's this gorgeous new font that they're using on the cover. And then they asked if I wanted to put in new materials. So I've written a letter to future readers, about-

Amanda : 04:39 Oh, that's great!

Justina Chen: 04:41 Yes, I'm really excited about that.

Danielle: 04:43 That is so great to hear. I'm glad that you are working on new things. And that your work is still getting a lot of attention. I have another burning question. It's about *Firefly*.

Justina Chen: 04:57 Oh yes, okay.

Danielle: 04:57 So it's going to break my heart if you're not a fan, but you've got to be, right?

Justina Chen: 05:01 Oh, I am such a fan. Are you kidding me? *laughter*

Danielle: 05:06 So for listeners who haven't read *Lovely, Dark, And Deep*, you totally should, but also *Firefly* plays a significant part of that story, and it's really meaningful to the protagonist. And so we assumed you were a fan-

Justina Chen: 05:21 Massive fan.

Danielle: 05:22 Yes! Great. Excellent. What other stories have influenced your work?

Justina Chen: 05:28 Oh gosh, that is such a good question.

Danielle: 05:32 I try to only ask good questions.

Justina Chen: 05:36 You know, I read an intense amount of nonfiction. Part of that is also getting to work with all these leaders who are in all these different areas of life, whether it's gaming, or they're in healthcare. And so I read a lot of nonfiction, and I feel like that actually keeps my brain totally open to new ideas. Right? And so these weird ideas get funneled into fiction. So I would just say just reading really broadly.

Amanda : 06:06 That is a great tip. Read a lot. I just read *Radium Girls* and that really stuck with me. It's nonfiction, but it's so haunting. I could see that inspiring so much fiction. So pro tip, keep reading *laughter*

Amanda : 06:23 Here on this reading podcast. *laughter*

Danielle: 06:26 All right, so we brought you on the show today to talk about, *Tell Me How You Really Feel* by Aminah Mae Safi.

Amanda : 06:34 Rachel Recht is the next great filmmaker. At least, she will be as soon as she can get her movie finished. She works hard not to rely on anyone, especially not Sana, the beautiful cheerleader who asked her out freshman year as what had to be some kind of cruel joke. Sana is the picture of the perfect daughter. She may not know what she wants to do next year. Does she want to go to Princeton like her family believes, or fly halfway across the world for an internship in India? But she knows she never quite got over her crush on Rachel. When Sana is the only one who can save Rachel's movie from mediocrity, it's sure sparks will fly, but whether it's hatred or love, neither of them know yet.

Danielle: 07:09 *sings* Dun, dun, dunnnn!

Amanda : 07:10 But we know! *laughter* It's right on the cover.

Danielle: 07:14 This cover. Yeah. I've been walking by this cover... Because we've had this book on our kitchen table for a long time, and every time I walk by it makes me so happy because it's contemporary YA with two girls in a romantic embrace on the cover, and we just don't see that enough, you guys.

Amanda : 07:36 Yeah, it's a really great cover. You're not going to look at this cover and be like, "Oh, what a great best friend novel."

Justina Chen: 07:42 Yeah. Definitely not. Sparks are flying on that cover.

Danielle: 07:45 Yeah.

Danielle: 07:46 Justina, what did you think of this book?

Justina Chen: 07:48 I thought that there are so many elements of this book that drew me in. First and foremost, I am a Gilmore Girls fan.

- Danielle: 07:57 Yeah. Let me read this dedication. "For Amy Sherman-Palladino. Thank you for never giving Roy Gilmore a decent boyfriend. She always had Paris."
- Justina Chen: 08:07 Yes, she did only did have Paris, and I just thought it was such a fresh way of the Gilmore Girls story retold from a different perspective, and from multiple new worlds. I personally love stories where I'm immersed into worlds I know very little about, for instance, the world of film. I really don't know anything about film, other than what I watch on screen. And so for me, it was really fascinating to learn about the cameras, the angles, the different types of people who go into creating a film. So I really enjoyed that.
- Justina Chen: 08:49 And the second thing I really enjoyed is I love the idea of having two coming of age stories in one, you know? This isn't just a romance, but two coming of age stories told from two different perspectives. That's delicious.
- Amanda : 09:03 I agree. I really liked that too. Especially because they were different. The two characters had to become better people in their own way. Like Sana had to learn to stand up for herself and what she really wanted more. And Rachel had to learn not to be a jerk to everybody she meets on a daily basis.
- Danielle: 09:21 She's the Paris.
- Amanda : 09:22 Yeah, I guess I, you know, I don't have all the Gilmore Girls baggage that you all do going into it, because I only watched some of it. So I did not immediately recognize her as Paris. So, when I first saw Rachel without this Paris baggage, I was like, "Why can't she be nice to just like one person? *laughter* She just needs a friend. Why is she being this way?" But then once Danielle pointed out the Paris thing, I was like, "Oh, okay. Yep. There it is."
- Justina Chen: 09:48 Mm-hmm (affirmative). You know? Because that was, for me, was the hardest thing to overcome because ... I think so many people who watched Gilmore Girls, there is a visceral dislike of Paris initially. Right?
- Danielle: 10:02 Did you know that Liza Weil, who plays Paris in Gilmore Girls, originally auditioned for Rory-

Justina Chen: 10:08 What?!

Danielle: 10:08 and then the part of Paris was written for her?

Justina Chen: 10:13 It was written for her? Okay. *laughter*

Amanda : 10:15 Did she just audition and they were like, "Oh, she is too intense. We gotta put her somewhere else."

Justina Chen: 10:20 Yeah. It does take the course of the series for you to love Paris, you know, and to see the beauty of her strength, like all people, it's the learning to love them because of their flaws, not just in spite of their flaws. Right?

Danielle: 10:38 Yeah. So knowing that Rachel would eventually come in her own, how great of a book could it have really been if she had been mean the whole time? But anyway, so we knew she was going to go somewhere. Sana on the other hand is this perfectionistic Rory type who lives with a single mom, and she has to go to family dinners on Sunday. I wanted to like her as much as I liked Rory. I didn't quite get there, but I wanted to know how you all felt. Amanda, what'd you think of her?

Amanda : 11:11 I thought that she sold the 'perfect child' really well. And then one thing that I really liked about her character was her real enjoyment of cheerleading, and how she just stuck with it, and all of her family thought that it was dumb, and all of her classmates thought that it was dumb. I thought it was very insightful how Sana says like, "This isn't an '80s movie. Cheerleaders aren't cool anymore." I really appreciated that. But she just really liked getting thrown and flipped in the air, and all these kinds of cool stunts that cheerleaders do.

Amanda : 11:43 So I thought that was a really cool characteristic. And I think a lot of teenagers will see that too because it's not like cheerleaders are just idiots who date the jocks, they're just people who chose this thing instead of this other thing. And it doesn't automatically mean that they're cool or anything like that.

- Danielle: 11:59 Yeah. Justina, you were talking about the window into these worlds. I feel like Aminah Mae knows cheerleaders, or was, in her past life, a cheerleader. She really gave me a window into that world.
- Justina Chen: 12:15 I totally agree, because those scenes seemed so authentic and real. You know, especially when she was talking about building the pyramids, and the trust that's needed. And actually, that's one thing that I really had hoped to see a little bit more of, Sana ... Because she was a leader, and so she was strong, you know?
- Justina Chen: 12:39 Yeah. I also think that one of the things that was missing from this book, deliberately, but you know, I felt it as a reader was any relationships outside of Rachel and Sana. They didn't really have any friends. Sana has one friend named Diesel, who pops in and out as the plot demands, but overall they didn't have a lot of relationships to show who they were outside of this love-hate relationship. Will they or won't they? Which felt like a missed chance to show more of who they each were as characters.
- Justina Chen: 13:11 Well I think for Rachel, that seems good and consistent with her character. I didn't expect Rachel to have a lot of friends, but I think for Sana, I think you're right. I would have expected her to have at least one good friend, just as Rory had Lane. But one thing I did love ... And I just want to go back to that soften and strengthen, for me that is so important, and that was probably my favorite part about the book. And it's something I had journaled about, gosh, about two years ago where I was going through a really tough time, and I just thought to myself, "Wow, when you soften, you can actually strengthen," and so to see both of them doing that. One softening, one strengthening, but becoming better people because of that I was just like, "Oh, I'm just so glad that there was a book that tackled that."
- Danielle: 14:07 And I just wanted to say something that I rarely say as a person with a short attention span, I could have used 15 more pages in this novel to add a friend.
- Amanda : 14:19 Just one. *laughter*
- Danielle: 14:20 Or, you know, maybe just 10 more pages and get some more Diesel. 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 Tell Me How You Really Feel and dig a little deeper.

Danielle: 14:43 Hey friends, 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 up, we'll be discussing Patron Saints Of Nothing by Randy Ribay. If you'd like to help us keep bringing you great content, order through the link in our show notes. Happy reading!

Amanda : 15:15 Welcome back y'all. It's time for Things We Like a Latte. Danielle, what's your brew of choice this week?

Danielle: 15:20 Well Amanda.

Amanda : 15:21 Well Danielle.

Danielle: 15:22 It's Reign.

Amanda : 15:24 Of course it is. *laughter*

Danielle: 15:25 So Claire recommended Reign.

Amanda : 15:29 This is R-E-I-G-N, for anyone wondering why Danielle likes weather.

Danielle: 15:36 *laughter* Oh yeah, no. The CW show, and it's over now, y'all. It was 2013 to 2017, but here's the thing, if you go into it with the mindset that this is Mary Queen of Scots as a soap opera, geared towards like 18 and 19 year old women, with all of the costuming done from Anthropology, and all of the music in the vein of the Lumineers, you're in the right head space. *laughter*

Danielle: 16:04 So I enjoyed Game of Thrones, but there were many things I disliked. And I have to say that the things that Game of Thrones got wrong about women and power, Reign gets right.

Amanda : 16:19 That's a good observation.

Danielle: 16:20 Thank you.

Amanda : 16:22 Justina, what do you Like a Latte this week?

Justina Chen: 16:24 Oh my gosh. I Like a Latte for a long time, Firefly. Yes, a part of it did inspire so many elements of Lovely, Dark, and Deep, one of my novels. Here's why! Okay, frst of all, when you were talking about women in power, Firefly completely promoted female power and I loved it. I loved all the characters. I think it was such a weird space, western premise, but it really worked. And again, I just really loved the characters, particularly River Tam. I thought her character was so fascinating, and she was a perfect example of soft and strong, you know? So incredibly fierce, right? But also there's a softness to her, too.

Danielle: 17:14 You know what I Like a Latte? Justina Chen.

Amanda : 17:17 It's a good one.

Danielle: 17:18 How about you Amanda? What's your brew of choice?

Amanda : 17:22 Well, we are going for three TV shows here this week, because for me it's got to be Good Omens.

Danielle: 17:27 She called dibs on it, you all.

Amanda : 17:28 I did call dibs on it, but most specifically what I like a latte is the love story between Aziraphale and Crowley. It is done so well, and I think that it is a really good example of the difference between queer baiting and subtext. It's never stated that it's romance in the show, but it is so clear in the way that they interact with each other that they are deeply in love with each other, and are just trying to get through the end of the world together ... Or not the end of the world ideally. And it's

done so well. I mean it's basically not subtext. It's pretty much text without being stated. But it is so good. It is worth watching just for that.

Danielle: 18:11 We are going to take a quick break, and when we come back we'll return to our discussion on Tell Me How You Really Feel. The rest of the show will contain spoilers, so if you're leaving us here, keep in touch on Instagram and Twitter at YA Cafe podcast. We'll be back.

Amanda : 18:42 Welcome back, y'all, to the YA Cafe. We're continuing our discussion on Tell Me How You Really Feel by Aminah Mae Safi. If you haven't read this yet, we want to warn you again that this segment will contain spoilers.

Danielle: 18:52 Spoilers! And Helen of Troy.

Amanda : 18:56 Yep. This is one of my favorite things about this book.

Danielle: 18:58 Me too.

Justina Chen: 18:59 Me three.

Danielle: 19:01 Woot! That's math.

Amanda : 19:03 So the Helen of Troy thread throughout the novel, is that Rachel's movie is a retelling of the Odyssey, and originally she has it written with Helen of Troy as this vapid villainess kind of ...

Danielle: 19:17 and Cassandra is the quiet girl.

Amanda : 19:20 Cassandra is the narrator. She's like the hero, and the story is told to her perspective.

Danielle: 19:26 Yeah.

New Speaker: 19:26 It's all very second wave feminism. *laughter*

Danielle: 19:30 So at one point it said, "It was easy to digest, this film, a consumable kind of feminist vision. The pretty girl was bad, and the quiet girl was good, and she had warned them all. But it didn't question why those women had been pitted against each other in the first place." And this is the crux of everything, there's so much in this story and as soon as Sana sees it, she's like, "What? Why is Helen the villain, just because she's pretty? Did you even ask Helen how she feels about that?"

Amanda : 20:02 Yeah, I think that it was great that Sana was able to look at Helen and have this empathy, because Helen was clearly meant to be this avatar for Sana, and Sana's experiences in the world. That was something I felt went less successfully than the Helen of Troy thread. I liked having them running parallel, but as we start to peel away the layers of Sana's quote unquote 'perfect daughter'-ness, I think that the character of Sana started to get a little lost. What did you all think?

Justina Chen: 20:33 Well, this would be my ask of the author, Aminah. I really hope that your next book is about Helen of Troy.

Danielle: 20:42 Yeah. I would love to read this story.

Justina Chen: 20:44 Oh my gosh. Give me that novel, you go write that one, I hope it's on the docket. If it is, move it up, because that is a story that should be told. And it was so truly novel. It was novel.

Danielle: 20:59 Yeah!

Justina Chen: 20:59 Right? I got so excited about that, because I was just like, "Oh! Was Helen of Troy actually trained to be a spy, and she was deliberately supposed to start the war? I mean, whoa, that would just blow my mind.

- Danielle: 21:13 And I've read a lot of these stories, and I am totally guilty of having not really spent a lot of time thinking about Helen. And I've read a lot of classics. So this book making me think of Helen of Troy in a whole new light, yeah, I definitely want more of that.
- Justina Chen: 21:32 But I think it is really interesting to think about how beauty can be a silencer. And so, for Sana, it would've been interesting to see, for my perspective, how people truly reacted to her. Because she had it from her perspective out. Like, she would do the Sana smile, and everybody would be like *gasp* Right, you know? But it'd be really interesting to have her move into a situation where her beauty literally silenced her, if that makes sense.
- Amanda : 22:05 No, it definitely does. And I think that Rachel mentions this in the novel, where people tend to forget that Sana is queer. Sana's never hidden it. Sauna has said it the whole time, but because she's this pretty, perfect girl, people just forget.
- Justina Chen: 22:20 Assume.
- Amanda : 22:20 Or erase it from her.
- Justina Chen: 22:22 Oh, that's such a good phrasing of that, because it has been erased from her.
- Danielle: 22:28 And she's flirting with Rachel, and basically the thing that starts the hate relationship that we begin this novel with, is that Sana asked Rachel out on a date. Rachel thought it was a prank, because Sana was so pretty. So Sana's never hidden that part of her. She's been out. But like you said, Amanda, it's been erased from her identity. Like she's not allowed to be pretty and queer.
- Danielle: 22:53 And Amanda, you were also talking about peeling back the layers of Sana in other spaces, and one of the relationships that I struggled with in this book was the relationship with her single mother. Because I knew the Gilmore Girls thing, and I loved Lorelei, even through her flaws. So I was ready to love this mother, and it was fine. And then we have this scene at the hospital. Rachel and Sana get in a car crash and Sana breaks her arm. This is straight out of Gilmore Girls, and Farrah comes in and is like, "Where's my daughter?", and she's panicking. And then Sana tells her to go to hell.
- Amanda : 23:36 It was too much too quickly.

- Justina Chen: 23:37 Mmhhmm (affirmative)
- Danielle: 23:38 Yeah, totally amped up.
- Amanda : 23:41 I feel like most people cannot imagine saying those words to their mother.
- Justina Chen: 23:47 Yeah, no, no. *laughter* I think it would have been an even more effecting scene if there was more buildup beforehand, and her feeling more crushed into someone's bubble of life for her. If she really felt that.
- Amanda : 24:09 Yeah. It really felt like she was getting most of the pressure from her grandparents, and from her whole extended family. And so for her to lash out at her mother in this way felt just so out of character.
- Danielle: 24:24 So another thing I wanted to talk about in the spoiler section is Rachel's mentor Douga. So Rachel and Sana go to this private, very rigorous school. And in these situations it can be normal to have ... Not a person who's teaching for teaching's sake, but a professional who's brought in from an industry to be a teacher. And I think that the mentor, the film teacher, Douga, is this person, because she is a terrible teacher. *laughter*
- Danielle: 24:55 So Rachel has her change of heart and she's like, "Oh, I get it. Helen should've been the narrator all along," and she makes this beautiful movie, and Douga's like, "That is trash. Go back to the original way you had it."
- Amanda : 25:09 I feel like Douga is your jazz band director.
- Danielle: 25:11 Oh yeah, the jazz band director from In The Key Of Nira Ghani. That is right. Terrible teachers, man. I struggle to see them depicted on the page, but I guess they're real, they exist out there. Douga's one of them.

- Justina Chen: 25:25 Okay. So I had a different response to Douga, because Douga actually went out on the line for Rachel, and from what my reading of it, secured the financial aid for her, vouched for her, even before Rachel had finished her project. And so for me, I think Douga is a little bit like real world. You've got a deadline, you have a budget, you got to finish, somehow some way. Based on her character, I wasn't sure if she would've said, "You have to do it with this particular creative vision", that didn't seem consistent with that Douga character. But I could certainly see a teacher just saying, "You got to finish," and it's a very real world lesson.
- Amanda : 26:12 Oh yeah. I definitely agree. I think that the deadline isn't what made me think that she was a pretty lousy teacher, it was that at the very end, when Rachel had made this drastic edit that made the movie much deeper, made it much more interesting, and more in line with a Rachel original vision. Then Douga was like, "Let's go back to Douga-vision. I liked Douga-vision."
- Danielle: 26:34 Douga-vision 2020. *laughter* Yeah, I think that that is a great point. Especially for seniors, I mean, Rachel's going to go off to college next year, so you do want to treat seniors like they're going to join the real world in a matter of months, but also as a teacher provide room for creative ingenuity, and license, and growth. So definitely both aspects of that are present in Douga.
- Amanda : 27:05 I think that there is a lot of students who will enjoy this book, especially people who don't have all of the baggage and all the tropes going into it that we do, and I think for a lot of people that's really going to be their jam, they're going to really enjoy this.
- Danielle: 27:20 I agree. I can see a lot of students liking this, and maybe going from this to Gilmore Girls.
- Justina Chen: 27:28 Like both of you, I do think that there are going to be a number of readers who are going to find this book. And this book will, I hope, give them encouragement to have courage to forge their own way, whether it's having a unique creative vision that other people tell them, "No, it's never going to work," or, "That is not a great idea," but to have the wherewithal to see it through, or to have the courage to step off this predestined path that you're supposed to take, and just have the courage to reimagine and imagine your own life your way.
- Amanda : 28:04 Great. Mic drop.
- Danielle: 28:06 Mic drop. That's our show for today, friends. Thank you so much for joining us, Justina.

Justina Chen: 28:12 Oh gosh. This has been such a pleasure and privilege. You guys are awesome.

Danielle: 28:16 You're awesome.

Justina Chen: 28:18 You are.

Amanda : 28:20 No, you! *laughter*

Danielle: 28:22 You can find Justina at justinachen.com. You can find us at [@yacafepodcast](https://www.instagram.com/yacafepodcast). We'd love to hear from you. And if you're enjoying the show, leave us a review. Happy reading!