

YA Café Podcast
Episode 58: Patron Saints of Nothing
27 January 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 Patron Saints of Nothing by Randy Ribay. Grab a mug of your favorite beverage friends, and let's talk books.
- Amanda : 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: 00:29 And I'm Danielle Hall, an eighth and ninth grade English teacher and I blog at TeachNouvelle.com.
- Amanda : 00:34 Joining us today in a slightly different format will be Zshavette, bookstagrammer @wanderlost.soul. She had a great conversation with us about this book and we were able to keep the spirit of most of these responses, but due to some sound quality problems, we wound up rerecording them. So it may sound a little more chopped up than our conversations usually do, but it should still be some really great content and a really good discussion about a book that we all enjoyed a lot.
- Danielle: 00:59 It's ironic because she was recording in a café and we're YA Cafe, but it turns out cafés are really loud places.
- Amanda : 01:06 Not great for podcasting, *laughter* who knew? In Patron Saints of Nothing, Jay Reguero, a Filipino-American teenager, has mostly maintained his connection to his family in the Philippines through letters to his cousin, Jun. Or did, before they lost touch a few years ago. Now Jay is just trying to make it through his senior year before heading to college in the fall. When he gets news that June has died, no one will give him any details. Jay wants answers and he travels to the Philippines to get them. As he learns more about President Duterte's war on drugs and the truth about his own cousin, Jay is forced to reckon with a complex reality and his own role in it. Danielle, what were your first impressions?
- Danielle: 01:43 Well, I really enjoyed this book and as with some other books, it's hard to say that you enjoy it because it's like so intense and thought provoking and difficult and emotional. But I enjoyed it kind of in an all encompassing, learned a lot from it sort of way. I really liked the characters. I really connected with the premise and man, this is just a great book. What did you think Amanda?

- Amanda : 02:11 I loved it. I mean I sat down to read it and I figured I would read 15 to 20 minutes and then I wound up reading the entire thing that morning. I was fully captivated by the characters and I really loved it.
- Danielle: 02:23 One of the reasons we sought out Zshavette's opinion is that in addition to being an avid bookstagrammer, she also lives in the Philippines. We thought it was so important to add a Filipino voice to the conversation. So Zshavette, what did you think of this book?
- Zshavette: 02:38 I've been here in the Philippines all of my life, so it's all I've ever known. But what happened with Jay and his family was definitely a very familiar experience. We have family members come home every year with Balikbayan boxes and things like that. So it was really interesting to finally have a book with Filipino representation because I feel like us Filipinos, we don't get enough rep in YA. We've always been the side characters or like the best friend who is half Filipino, or things like that. So now we have one and it's set in the Philippines too. So that made it a really interesting thing to read about, and yeah I really liked it. I don't think it was perfect for me but it was definitely on the scale of like *The Hate U Give*, in terms of experience and just eye opening, very intense, brutally honest, kind of read.
- Amanda : 03:49 One thing Zshavette mentioned that I think will be very familiar to a lot of people is this concept of people leaving their home for another place. It's a conversation that people all over the world have and you hear it a lot, especially in our lives with people from Puerto Rico or from people living in rural communities in the United States. Do you stay and try to make your home better or do you leave to try to make your life better somewhere else?
- Danielle: 04:13 I thought the concept of leaving to make a "better life" was really interesting. I think that typically when people say that what they mean is to go make more money somewhere else. Sometimes obviously there's this element of finding a safer place, like with refugees and asylum seekers or a place with better education. But in this book it seems that the reason Jay's family left the Philippines was to make more money and then send money back home.
- Amanda : 04:39 I mean, I don't think that's necessarily fair to say. Like when you say just make more money, it's really downplaying the things that money can give you. Living in a wealthier country means you have access to better healthcare, better education, like you said, all these kinds of things that really impact you in a deeper way than just trying to buy the next new shiny thing. So I don't think that you're totally wrong, but I think that to say it that way is a little diminishing.

- Danielle: 05:03 What I was kind of reacting to is the idea that a better life might be somewhere else, but like you're still leaving behind your family. So I just wanted to account for that. Like your life may be better in some ways, but us calling it blanket better I can imagine is really heartbreaking for some people to hear us say.
- Zshavette: 05:23 The thing is we have what we call OFWs or overseas Filipino workers, because when you find jobs here in the Philippines, the minimum wages are awfully low. So a lot of people kind of want to go somewhere else, find new, better jobs that pay well. Which is kind of hard because you're leaving behind everyone and you're all alone in this new country. But they do what they have to do to provide for their family. I feel like, yeah, it's definitely not downplayed in the media that the Philippines is this developing country where a lot of people are struggling. Even the middle class people are struggling every single day, because it's just really different. The amount of work time you put every single day and the amount of money that gets back to you by the end of the month, it's really not balanced. That's why I think a lot of people really just want to move out, go to a different place where it pays well. So yeah, that's basically what happens here.
- Danielle: 06:31 In this book, Jay is depicted as kind of not being able to fit back in culturally. His Dad is Filipino and has strong memories of the country, but Jay's only been there once, of course when he met Jun and they started exchanging letters. And when he goes back, his Filipino family looks at him as completely American. Did that ring true for you, Zshavette?
- Zshavette: 06:53 I don't know why it was depicted that way. I guess a lot of families do that, but the Philippines is very westernized I think. So when Jay was exploring the mall with Mia and he was pointing out these little places like, "Oh, we have that in America, in the US." I feel like it really encapsulates how the Philippines has been westernized. And when you're a foreigner in the Philippines, you wouldn't feel like a complete stranger because there are things for you everywhere. So from my experience here in our city, you really could fit right back in with I guess just the right people, you know?
- Amanda : 07:36 I think that the right people is kind of the key there. It's not so much that Jay's coming to a country that's not welcoming him, but into a family that is not interested in sharing their life or sharing their grief with him. But they still open their house to him and they wanted to show him all the museums and those kinds of things about the country. So yeah, when you said, "The right people," I was like, "Yup, Tito Maning was not the right people."
- Danielle: 07:58 You make a really great point about Tito Maning not being open to sharing his grief and things like that either. The other element of course is that Jay comes in to the house on a mission. He's not feeling particularly open to them or their side of things, either. He comes in suspicious and demanding things like the truth about a situation that they're not ready to talk about. And there was

this really striking moment when Tito Maning took Jay to the museum and he tells him, "Our country is full of invading foreigners, who thought they knew us better than we knew ourselves." And he's trying to draw Jay into feeling that as a Filipino, but also pushing him away and telling him, "You don't know us better than we know ourselves."

- Amanda : 08:42 I didn't read that as him drawing Jay in. It felt like he was reminding Jay, "You're still half a colonizer." That's how I took it.
- Zshavette: 08:49 So this actually came up in a lot of the conversations in the book, how like Filipinos and the Philippines have been colonized by a lot of different places. So we've had this topic for so many years in my history classes, that sometimes it would get so tiring to just listen about the same things over and over again. But our history teacher, she would ask us like, "What truly makes a Filipino?" Because our culture is pretty much a mixture of a lot of different cultures. We've had culture from the US brought into our own culture. We have culture from China brought into our culture. We have culture from Spain brought into our culture. So there's that underlying question all the time: Are we truly Filipinos? What really is the Filipino culture?
- Amanda : 09:49 I thought that one of the strongest things about this book was how throughout Jay's sleuthing and meeting Filipino family and learning about the Philippines, we never lost sight of the fact that Jay is there chasing a ghost. Jay is there to figure out what happened to Jun. And the reason that it's happening in the first place is because Jay failed his cousin in the most human way. Not in any kind of major betrayal, but just by losing contact. That reshuffling of priorities that just slides the people we love most lower in the deck. And the way that Jay tries to find these answers while also carrying that shame and regret and real guilt, I thought it was really well done. It's the exact right amount throughout the novel for the reader to be able to see how much this is impacting Jay.
- Danielle: 10:31 Yeah, I felt that too. And I just felt kind of guilty of the people I've lost touch with in my own life and I was like, "Oh, this is like the worst case scenario of something that could happen to someone you've lost touch with."
- Amanda : 10:44 Definitely. And everybody has. That's why I say it's such a human failing that we all have done to people that when we think of them, we really love them, but we just let them fall away.
- Danielle: 10:55 Lose touch.

Amanda : 10:55 Yup. And another thing that I really appreciated, and it's what we talk about on the podcast a lot-

Danielle: 11:02 You keep saying that, like, "We're the gay podcast", and it's like a self fulfilling prophecy.

Amanda : 11:06 I mean, I challenged you to name a book that you had read that did not have a gay character in it and you were unable to.

Danielle: 11:14 That is wrong. I said Stay Sweet by Siobhan Vivian. Just because you didn't read that book doesn't mean it didn't exist.

Amanda : 11:22 There were no gay characters in Stay Sweet?

Danielle: 11:24 No.

Amanda : 11:25 Really?

Danielle: 11:26 Really.

Amanda : 11:27 I'm willing to check the tapes on this. So what I liked a lot was this very easy representation of queer characters. I was so glad to have that in there, especially with the characters that were in the Philippines. I really liked when Jay was thinking about his aunts not being able to get married and how unfair that was. It's just this good little reminder to American audiences that there's so much more work to do on LGBTQ rights all over the world. I mean, it's still a struggle everywhere, but there's queer people everywhere. So good reminder to us, don't forget about your family.

Danielle: 12:00 Absolutely. I liked that too. And I liked that they were a part of the family, but that there was also tension there. It was just really great. And with that friends, we'll take our first break. Then we'll return to our discussion of Patron Saints of Nothing and dig a little deeper.

- Danielle: 12:25 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. If you'd like to help us keep bringing you great content, order through the link in our show notes. Happy reading.
- Amanda : 12:43 Welcome back you all to the YA Cafe. If you are familiar with our show, you'll notice that we didn't like anything this week because everything is terrible. *laughter* No, the recording just went through badly, so we figured we would just skip it for this week and you'll just have to fend for yourselves to find things to Like a Latte or a little-tay. *laughter* So we're continuing our discussion of Patrons Saints of Nothing by Randy Ribay. If you haven't read this yet, we want to warn you again that this segment will contain spoilers.
- Danielle: 13:20 Spoilers.
- Danielle: 13:22 So there is a little bit of romance in this book. He has this like, attraction to Mia. She has a boyfriend but they go ice skating. I don't know. What did you think about that, Amanda?
- Amanda : 13:35 I thought is was cute. It thought it was fun. I don't know that guy. I don't care about him. *laughter*
- Zshavette: 13:40 I think that the romance between Mia and Jay kind of put me off a little bit because it was kind of crossing towards the cheating route. I mean they never explicitly said that they were going to be anything more than friends and things like that, but Mia had a boyfriend and she wasn't exactly pushing Jay away. So yeah.
- Danielle: 14:13 Mia ends up really important to the story because not only is there this little romance aspect, she is a journalist and she takes Jay to the squatter area in Manila and basically shows him this other side from where his uncle lives and I really liked that part. It would have been like, an incomplete novel without seeing that. She introduces him to this woman named Reyna, who is a survivor of human trafficking. And the whole thing was really interesting and connected to the plot, but also gave Mia a lot to do as a character.
- Amanda : 14:49 One of the things I really liked when they went to talk to Reyna was as she's describing her situation and the choices that she's made, Jay looks at her choices and says, "Why did she do this? She could have gotten out of this situation, she should have done this other thing. Anything would be

better than that." And Mia tells him very flat out, "You can't say that. You've never been in her situation. You don't know her situation and never will be in her situation." And so I thought that was just a really great example where Jay wants to fix it. He is seeing problems and he just wants to fix it. So it was very good to have these characters like Mia and Reyna through her experiences who just put him back in his place like, "You need to stay in your lane. You don't understand what's happening here in this deep living through it kind of way and you can't understand these people's situations."

Danielle: 15:42 Yeah, that was a really important moment because Jay got to see a reality that he was not expecting and like you said, feeling like he was going to swoop in and fix it and it became clear in that moment that that was not how this novel was going to go. Jay was not going to fix things. His character arc was realizing that he didn't have the experience, the tools or the responsibility to do that for Reyna, but that he could do other things.

Zshavette: 16:13 Yeah, yeah. I remember the same scene that Amanda was talking about when Jay was starting to defend himself. When Reyna said the thing about men and then he was starting to protest about it. I really liked that Mia kind of opened his eyes and told him, "You know nothing. You know nothing, John Snow." So I really like that.

Danielle: 16:40 Another moment that was a real wake up call for Jay in this novel was when he went to talk to a priest to try to like get to the bottom of this and he finds out that Jun actually did use and did sell meth. And the whole novel Jay had been operating under this fierce conviction that that could not possibly be his cousin. And in that moment, the priest points out to Jay that meth is a hunger suppressant that is cheaper than food, and posits that because Jun was providing for Reyna, it was better for him to pass the money along to her for food and then take meth himself. And this was such a wake up call for me in addition to Jay because I have been privileged enough to never have been in extreme poverty or facing those choices to stave off hunger and wow, I cannot even imagine. I was bowled over by this revelation.

Amanda : 17:42 I thought it was a really important choice to have Jun have used drugs and sold drugs in this novel, because we spend so much of this time feeling Jay's feelings for his cousin and retracing the steps of this good person whose life had value to the people who knew him and who loved him. And recognizing that him using these drugs and him selling these drugs doesn't take away from the fact that this is still a person whose life had value, who did not deserve to be killed for a couple of bad choices.

Danielle: 18:17 Yeah, you're right. It would not have been as striking of a story if Jun had been completely innocent. The point is that he sold and used for his survival and his family's survival, and because he was in this system of poverty and corruption and things like that, this came back to hurt him. But is that a choice that people should be murdered for?

Amanda : 18:44 Well, and it's also going back to what Mia told Jay, "You've never been in this life. You've never had to make these choices. You can't say what they should've done."

Danielle: 18:52 Yes. So we haven't talked much about the family that Jay comes into. Like you said, Tito Maning was authoritative and forbidding, but we also have Grace. Grace is Jay's cousin also queer-

Amanda : 19:08 surprise!

Danielle: 19:10 Surprise!

Danielle: 19:11 But she was so important to the story. In the beginning, Jay didn't like her. They kind of didn't get along for whatever reason, and then it comes out that she has been running this Instagram that Jun started that highlights murders in the war on drugs. And so basically she's a rebel in a rich house. It was cool.

Amanda : 19:34 Yeah, I thought she was a really good character.

Danielle: 19:37 Also, I think that it's Grace that encapsulates the big takeaway for American readers of this book. At one point she says to Jay, "You have only recently learned about any of this. You are not going to be the one to save us." That was directly talking to us. We're not going to be the only people that can solve this problem.

Amanda : 20:00 Yes, and also much of Jay's analysis of his own complicity in this whole situation is that he didn't even know that it was happening. Didn't know that he should be asking his legislators for international pressure. Didn't know that he should be reaching out to nonprofit organizations and working with people in the Philippines who are doing great work to try to stop this. Protecting journalists, calling for light into human rights abuses and things like this. So I don't think that the takeaway for Jay was just 'you won't be the one to save us', it was 'you need to support in your own way'.

- Danielle: 20:38 Right. So good. Like, you can't come to the Philippines to save us, but there is work you can do. Even like the Instagram that Grace runs is work, right?
- Amanda : 20:47 Yeah. So this is something that we talk about as Americans with the information that we have in our country about what President Duterte has done. But as Zshavette says, the feeling in the Philippines doesn't quite line up with that.
- Zshavette: 21:03 There were parts that I was like, "Oh, this is kind of being biased," but truth be told, the government in the Philippines is not perfect by any means. But I can say that the president, he has had really great achievements that was done for the country, but not a lot of people talk about it. So the Philippines has three parts. There's Luzon, Visayas, Mindanao, and from what I know, I could be wrong about this, but from what I remember, all of the presidents that we've had in the Philippines came from Luzon. And President Duterte, he is from Mindanao. So I feel like us from Visayas and Mindanao, we kind of felt like he was one of us. Even though we're in the same country, there's still a lot of different cultures, a lot of different languages. And the people kind of felt like there was someone who could understand us and understand our cry out for help, like the people from Visayas and Mindanao, most of our dialects kind of in line together and a lot of our culture's kind of in line with each other compared to that of the ones from Luzon.
- Zshavette: 22:25 So again, yeah, we kind of felt like we were understood. I mean I'm not by any means blindly submitting to him, but I think that he's definitely not as bad as the media points out. But the book actually does a good thing of balancing things out because it definitely showed some bad sides to the government, but also some good sides. So I guess for the most part, this book really just rang true to me.
- Amanda : 22:58 I think that you do see this perspective in the book. I think that you see it especially in Tito Maning's perspective where obviously he's a huge fan of Duterte and he's not just this antagonistic force that he seems to be at the beginning of the novel. He clearly cares about his country, he cares about his family in his own weird, authoritarian way. And so you see that as the book goes on, not only in his, but Jay talks about how so much of the population in the Philippines supports the president and supports the policies, and he mentions that there is like an 80% approval rating for Duterte. So I think that that does come through in the book, but the fact is that this book is from Jay's perspective and Jay isn't going to like the guy when his closest connection to these policies are that his cousin was murdered.
- Amanda : 23:48 Even if he goes there and he sees this country that's thriving and doing so much better, none of that is going to matter as much as the fact that his cousin was murdered. I think that it makes total sense for it to be a very negative portrayal of the president and the policies. And I know a little bit about everything that's going on over there, but not as much as I ought to and it's something that I

should look more into. And there's a lot of resources in the back of this book that has some great references that I've started to dig into that are really wonderful to try to make sense of what all is happening.

Danielle: 24:19 Right. So we've been talking about these policies kind of vaguely and just for people who have gotten this far and don't know much about what's happening with the war on drugs in the Philippines and didn't read the book, so don't have that perspective. If you've gotten this far and those things are true of you, the situation is basically that the war on drugs in the Philippines makes using or selling drugs a capital offense. So when we talk about 'the situation', it is a lot of state sanctioned murders. And that is one of the reasons why we wanted to bring a Filipino voice on the podcast because it is easy for Americans to judge that from the outside just as Jay judged his family and it's important to hear voices from the inside too.

Amanda : 25:10 Yes. And I think that it's also equally important to remember that we too are living in a country with many, many state sanction murders. But with Jay and Jun's situation and the loss of Jun for Jay, I think is so crucial to zooming in on what policies actually mean for people's lives and people's families. It's very easy to be sort of blasé when it doesn't touch you and think, "I don't like to talk about politics, I'm not very interested in all that". But policies affect people, and this is a really great novel for zooming in on what does this actually look like, what does this mean for the families who lose people, whether they're in the country, saw it, live with them or not, and I think that it's something that is really worth keeping in the conversation. I think that this book is really wonderful for focusing on that and for showing some of the human hurt that comes with policies.

Danielle: 26:04 And everybody needs to read this book. This is one of our favorite reads of 2019.

Amanda : 26:10 Yup. We really loved it. And thanks for listening into a kind of weirder episode of the YA Cafe. If you have never listened to us before, please know that normally it's a more conversational podcast. This was just a weird episode, just how things worked out, but we're glad that you listened. We hope that you like the podcast as it was today and hope that you get a chance to read and love this book as much as we did.

Danielle: 26:33 That's our show for today, friends, and that's a wrap on our second season or "shelf" as we like to call it here in the YA Cafe podcast. Thank you so much for joining us, Zshavette. You can find all of Zshavette's beautiful photos and musings on Instagram at @wanderlost.soul. You can find us back in your feeds in late July, early August. If you missed any of our episodes, you can check out a list of books we covered and links to those episodes at our blog posts linked in our show notes.