

YA Café Podcast
Episode 60: *The Downstairs Girl*
8 August 2019

Danielle Hall: 00:00 Welcome to the YA Cafe, where we share conversations about books for teachers, readers, and caffeine addicts everywhere. On today's episode we'll be talking about *The Downstairs Girl* by Stacey Lee. 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, and this is episode number 60.

Amanda Thrasher: 00:36 What?!

Danielle Hall: 00:37 Most people celebrate 50 but I forgot.

Amanda Thrasher: 00:42 So here we are at our ... what's like a little bit more than a ...

Danielle Hall: 00:46 Super gold?

Amanda Thrasher: 00:46 Semi-centennial?

Amanda Thrasher: 00:47 It's our five dozenth episode!

Danielle Hall: 00:49 Oooh! *laughter*

Amanda Thrasher: 00:52 Being a Chinese American teenager in late 19th century Atlanta isn't easy, but Jo Kwan has made a life with some stability. She and her caretaker, Old Gin, live in secret in a hidden room

below a house, eavesdropping on the family living above them. When Jo's fired without cause from her job as a hat maker she has no choice but to return to work as a lady's maid for a girl she despises. Luckily, Jo has a secret. She's taken to writing an advice column as "Miss Sweetie," a sauce box of a writer who takes a stand against some of the injustices taking root in her town. As Jo hunts down the truth about her family, past, and what it means to be Miss Sweetie, it's clear that her life, and her city, are going to change.

Danielle Hall: 01:31 I love the word sauce box.

Amanda Thrasher: 01:33 I liked its presence in the book also. I was like "I don't know what this is, but I know exactly what this is based on context."

Danielle Hall: 01:39 Yeah. I was really excited for this book because I really enjoyed one of Stacy Lee's other novels, *Under a Painted Sky*, which has like a western setting and it's about a Chinese American girl who goes west, to San Francisco, for reasons I've forgotten. I forget plot details but not how a book makes me feel, and I still remember loving how that book made me feel.

Danielle Hall: 02:01 And *Downstairs Girl* in a lot of ways made me feel like, engaged by this witty protagonist who was very, very specific, and was smarter than most of the people around her. I really liked this book. How about you Amanda? What did you think?

Amanda Thrasher: 02:19 So I read this book after you did and you loved it so much and you were like, "I'm so excited for you to read this book." And I was like, "Cool," and I started reading it and I was like, "You know, not all books are for all people," *laughter* but I really enjoyed it after the first like 70 pages or so. I was super engaged. I got all the things that you mentioned about like this really witty protagonist, and like interesting cast of characters, and all these things. I did not see a lot of that in the first 70 pages I think because I did not have all the warm feelings from Stacy Lee, but I wound up really loving the book-

Danielle Hall: 02:52 Okay.

Amanda Thrasher: 02:52 ... After I got through that.

Danielle Hall: 02:53 So we should tell our listeners that you didn't read *Under a Painted Sky*.

Amanda Thrasher: 02:55 I did not.

Danielle Hall: 02:56 So it's not like you read it and hated it. You just didn't read it.

Amanda Thrasher: 02:58 Yes.

Danielle Hall: 02:59 Yes. Yeah. So it's true. Like we had different opinions on the first part, and it's hard to say how I would have felt about the first part had I not read the other book, because I did read the other book. But I think that one of the things that I struggled with with the first part, and like this isn't a spoiler, it happens within like the first 10 pages, and you said it in the summary, she gets fired from the hat shop because ... reasons.

Amanda Thrasher: 03:26 No, because no reasons. That's the whole thing.

Danielle Hall: 03:28 Yeah, no reasons. Like that's important. It was just racism. And I really thought the hat thing would come back around and it didn't. So like I say that in the spoiler-free section because I want readers to go into this just knowing that the hat thing is not going to come back around.

Amanda Thrasher: 03:44 Yeah. I thought it was weird to like spend a lot of time setting us in the hat shop, and with the characters of the hat maker and the assistant.

Danielle Hall: 03:52 And they both come back.

Amanda Thrasher: 03:54 I mean they kind of do, but I mean like when you're dealing with like the essential like first setting of a story, and then like immediately ripping us away from that, it felt like, "Oh, okay, well now I don't have anything to grab onto. I don't know anything about anyone."

Danielle Hall: 04:06 But neither did Jo. Maybe it's a form following content thing. One thing I loved about the hat shop, and I had to like take a break from reading and do some Googling, was that Jo does Chinese

knot tying and I was not familiar with this. I did not know how it was done and so I watched like a hundred YouTube videos about it because I was so fascinated. And that's one of the things I really like about Stacy Lee's books is that she gives her characters like interesting interests.

Amanda Thrasher: 04:38 Yeah, I thought that was cool. Like I liked that presence. I think I just felt like ... like we talked about a little bit before about how we thought that a lot of this book was going to be her like making her way back to being a hat maker, because that seemed to be what her passion was, but then it turned out that it wasn't. But like I think that the characters are fantastic. I think this was a really great book. I thought the beginning was weak.

Danielle Hall: 05:00 Fair. Okay. So a couple more things to talk about in the spoiler-free section. She goes from the hat world to this house which becomes the dominant setting of the book, and it is the Payne family, and they're are pain in her butt. So she goes to be a ladies maid to Caroline. And I thought this was so interesting because she has a past with this family. This is not a random choice. Like, she essentially grew up in this house with the Paynes, and then something happened and she got cast out, and like she doesn't really understand it, but Caroline doesn't like her. And there's all this tension. And Mrs. Payne doesn't like her. And I just thought all of that was so interesting, and for me definitely where like the primary mystery lies was like, "Why don't they like her? I don't get it. What's going to happen?"

Danielle Hall: 05:54 And another thing about this family, I think that this family would have said that they were pretty progressive people.

Amanda Thrasher: 06:02 Maybe, but they were not down with all the suffragette stuff happening either and ... I don't know.

Amanda Thrasher: 06:07 I mean did they think that they mistreated our noble hero?

Danielle Hall: 06:12 No.

Amanda Thrasher: 06:13 Did they? Yes.

Danielle Hall: 06:14 Yes.

Amanda Thrasher: 06:15 So one thing that's important to the book, as evidenced by the title of *The Downstairs Girl*, is that they are living below a different house in a secret like Underground Railroad compartment that is owned by one of the local newspaper publishers. And so Jo feels very attached to this family because she's grown up listening to them through her secret spy tube that-

Danielle Hall: 06:37 I loved that.

Amanda Thrasher: 06:37 Yeah, it was really sweet.

Danielle Hall: 06:40 And you know that's her way into this whole agony aunt persona is this family above her. And that really is what gives her like the mobility through the rest of the plot, is this connection to this family, and they don't know that she's there. Also like I haven't done all the historical research that Stacy Lee has, so I'm probably misrepresenting this, but this whole concept stems from the fact that it's like illegal at this point in time to rent to Chinese Americans.

Amanda Thrasher: 07:11 Yeah, I think it said that in there, either illegal or very difficult, because she did ask that one place like, "Hey, can we stay here?" And they were like, "Not enough money in the world for you." So it's either illegal or people aren't going to do it because people are terrible.

Danielle Hall: 07:26 And I want to talk more about that in the spoiler section, but before we leave, I wanted to read one of the examples of the agony aunt letters, which function as epigraphs in this book as an introduction to some of the chapters. So here we go.

Danielle Hall: 07:44 "Dear Miss Sweetie, my sisters and I wonder why must a woman suffer a few days each month? Sincerely, bloated, crampy, and spotty."

Danielle Hall: 07:53 "Dear bloated, crampy and spotty. Because the alternative is worse, although they do get to vote. Sincerely, Miss Sweetie."

Danielle Hall: 08:01 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 *The Downstairs Girl* and dig a little deeper.

Danielle Hall: 08:21 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 *The Revolution of Birdie Randolph* by Brandy Colbert. Order this book through the link in our show notes and help us keep bringing you great content. Happy reading.

Amanda Thrasher: 08:48 Welcome back y'all. It's time for Things We Like a Latte. Danielle, what's your brew of choice this week?

Danielle Hall: 08:55 Well, Amanda ...

Amanda Thrasher: 08:56 Well Danielle ...

Danielle Hall: 08:58 So I finally got around to reading *Lies My Teacher Told Me* by James Loewen, and it's great. Like, it came out a long time ago, like almost 30 years ago, and I wish I had read it a lot earlier, but I am really enjoying it. Basically he talks about how American history textbooks in the United States have been written to perpetuate white supremacy, and to share this cultural mythology that erases the contributions of people of color and indigenous people. These textbooks do this in such a way that generates these quote unquote "patriotic undertones", and sustains white supremacy in a very insidious way. And Loewen really picks apart how that mythology was established, where it is erroneous, and how we could better serve students by teaching a truthful history.

Danielle Hall: 09:43 So strongly recommend *Lies My Teacher Told Me*. Also there is a young readers version which I have but haven't read yet, so I will be sharing that on Instagram when I am done with it.

Amanda Thrasher: 09:55 So as a teacher do you feel lied to and or that you are a liar?

Danielle Hall: 10:00 Yes, both of those things, absolutely. You know, like I don't want to go into a lot of specific examples, because then it won't be things I like a latte, it'll be like things I hate a latte. But yeah, I mean it's very clear that these lies were in the textbooks, and as long as your teachers had to teach the textbooks, or like were so overwhelmed that they couldn't question them, or ... There are just so many aspects to it, it's very, very complex. It's not just like, you know, "the earth is flat" sort of thing, it's like very insidious and complicated, and it is very interesting to unravel this and I think it will make me a better teacher. How about you Amanda? What do you Like a Latte?

Amanda Thrasher: 10:45 Well, for me this week I just devoured the book *Fly Girls* by Keith O'Brien. It is the story of five of the early female aviators in the United States.

Danielle Hall: 10:56 You're a female aviator!

Amanda Thrasher: 10:58 I am, but I am not that kind of female aviator because they die a lot more and I don't like those odds. But this book is really fantastic. It talks a lot about early aviation and the concerted efforts of male aviation groups and the races to keep those girls out because "They just don't have the constitution for it, you see!" And I really just liked how this book not only told the story of the female aviators, but like provided enough background of like all the male aviators crashing and dying too that like it's clear that when a female dies it's not because she's a girl, it's because early aviation is a nightmare and a graveyard. And so I just love this book. I thought that it was so well done. It's *Fly Girls* by Keith O'Brien.

Danielle Hall: 11:42 Excellent. And while we're here do you want to share a funny headline you dug out of the Coast Guard archives this week?

Amanda Thrasher: 11:51 Yeah. So I found this newspaper article from 1974 when the first female was stationed at ... I believe it is Westport, but it doesn't matter. What's important is that this headline from 1974 says, "A pert lass; a CG first." *laughter* And I'm just like, "Oh newspapers." And it also says, "She emphatically declares that she's not a Women's Liber." And then a year later there's an article saying, "CG experience radicalizes woman." And in the first paragraph it says, "Serving in the Coast Guard has done more to turn me into a radical Women's Lib-er than anything that ever happened to me." And I love it. Love that.

Danielle Hall: 12:30 We're going to take a quick break and when we come back we'll return to our discussion on *The Downstairs Girl*. 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 Thrasher: 13:02 Welcome back y'all to the YA Cafe.

Danielle Hall: 13:04 We're continuing our discussion on *The Downstairs Girl* by Stacy Lee. If you haven't read this yet we want to warn you again that this segment will contain spoilers.

Amanda Thrasher: 13:11 Spoilers!

Danielle Hall: 13:13 And horse racing.

Amanda Thrasher: 13:14 Boom. Before we jump into the horse racing ... Let's talk about ... She goes and works for the Paynes, and Caroline is terrible but Caroline has a secret: she's seeing a man, and then the man dumps her, and it's all just very scandalous.

Danielle Hall: 13:27 *laughter* They meet to make out in the graveyard.

Amanda Thrasher: 13:29 Awww yeah.*laughter*

Danielle Hall: 13:32 So what do you want to say about Caroline?

Amanda Thrasher: 13:34 I mean I just think that it's important to know that like Caroline is the worst from beginning to end. I mean she's not the worst actually. It turns out Mrs. Payne is the worst.

Danielle Hall: 13:43 Mrs. Payne is the worst.

Amanda Thrasher: 13:44 So Mrs. Payne seems like she's nice, like she's friendly to Jo and like she rehires her, and like she seems to keep her daughter Caroline in line. But then we discover that Mrs. Payne was Jo's biological mother who dumped her.

Danielle Hall: 14:00 Like she knew all along like-

Amanda Thrasher: 14:03 Ugh.

Danielle Hall: 14:03 ... it's not a random sort of thing. Like they lived in the same town the whole time, and that's why Jo grew up in the house, as a servant y'all.

Amanda Thrasher: 14:12 Yeah.

Danielle Hall: 14:13 Ah, this makes me ragey.

Amanda Thrasher: 14:14 I mean like by the end of it Jo is like, "I think about what else could she have done with like this half-Chinese baby and blah blah blah," and I'm like, "Well, she chose wrong."

Danielle Hall: 14:24 She did choose wrong.

Amanda Thrasher: 14:25 I don't know what choosing right would be but it wasn't that.

Danielle Hall: 14:28 So one of the things that we talk about a lot on this podcast is like how there's kind of like, the closure ending that you want, like you want the Mrs. Paynes of the world to get chewed out and like the Jo's to get closure. But then there's like these realistic sort of endings where things just sort of whimper out, because people don't want to address their past pain. And like this is one of those things where it's like, "Oh yeah, this is realistic." Jo Just has to get over it because Mrs. Payne is not going to acknowledge her.

Amanda Thrasher: 15:00 Yeah, it's terrible. I mean after Caroline discovers this fact she takes the opportunity to be like one iota less horrible to Jo, so like, props to Caroline. I was super riveted by all of this. I really liked when Jo stood up to her and Jo was like, "Nope, I don't have any patience for you. You're not at all what I imagined a mother would be," and all of these kinds of things, "And I'm going to enter this horse in the race. I think you'll find it's a great idea." Like ...

Danielle Hall: 15:28 Yeah.

Amanda Thrasher: 15:29 I really liked how Jo quickly leveraged this against her. Be like, “Oh, oh, I see. Okay, things are going to go my way now.”

Danielle Hall: 15:38 Yeah. Like, “You are never going to acknowledge me or like, give me any sort of help in the world, but you will give me this one thing, like, I have it over you.”

Amanda Thrasher: 15:48 Yeah.

Danielle Hall: 15:49 I liked that too. And you know when it came down to talking about like, the racism that not only exists in this historic perspective, but like still our society, like Caroline and Mrs. Payne were not willing to give up any part of their privilege and reputation to do the correct thing by Jo.

Amanda Thrasher: 16:09 Yeah. But what I want to talk about is suffragettes, because I also feel like that's a great modern day parallel because, by and large, the white female suffragettes were very into excluding people of color. They had the attitude and express this attitude verbatim in the book. Like, “Wait your turn. Your men got the right to vote and they messed it up. Like they're not going to vote.” I mean never mind all of the systemic, institutionalized blocks against them going to vote. These white women were just like, “No,” like, “They had their chance and they blew it so now it's our turn.” Like, “I can't believe that black men were able to vote before we were, us, decent white women.” Like ...

Danielle Hall: 16:47 Oh, that was so good. And I really loved that scene at the suffragette meeting. So Jo comes into this with Noemi who works in the Payne household, and they were just so good together, and Noemi has like so much energy, and like you said, the white suffragettes or just like, “No, wait your turn.”

Amanda Thrasher: 17:10 Yeah, and that's still a huge problem. Like anytime people ignore intersectionality and ignore like all of the areas that need addressing ...

Danielle Hall: 17:17 Right, we want gay marriage before trans ...

Amanda Thrasher: 17:20 Exactly. All I could think about reading this was the Human Rights Campaign with their, you know, neo liberal, like, “Trans people, just wait your turn. We're going to get gay marriage going, that's going to help like rich gays, and then we're going to help you out.” So I definitely felt like the

parallels were very present and like important to keep in mind for all activist groups to not leave people out, because obviously somebody like Noemi would be hugely powerful and incredibly influential in like her sphere if you give her a microphone.

Danielle Hall: 17:51 Yes, I agree. And one of the things I love about Stacey Lee is how strategically she creates these parallels between her historical novels and like, our modern world. Like, these are not foreign struggles to us, we still have them, and it's so intentional and so well done. I truly find her work so riveting. Like I am definitely one of her true fans who will like buy everything she writes from now on.

Amanda Thrasher: 18:21 I loved this book being a historical book because I think that it's really important to remember that we have always been a nation of immigrants, and that includes a lot of people who don't fit into like black or white, and like their stories in historical fiction often are completely erased. Like, have you ever read a book about a Chinese person in the 1900s in the south?

Danielle Hall: 18:45 By Stacey Lee.

Amanda Thrasher: 18:47 By Stacy Lee. *laughter* I'm not sure that I have, and it's hugely important to just like fill in these gaps of our cultural consciousness, and our like idea of who we are and who has built this country. So like the presence of Jo as a Chinese protagonist, hugely important, great that she had to grapple with it all the time. Like old Gin at one point during the streetcar segregation was like, "Where are we supposed to go? We're not black. We're not white. Do you want us to go like, on the hood? Like, what's up?" And I really thought that she did so good with painting this world where Jo doesn't quite know exactly where she fits but she knows where she doesn't fit.

Danielle Hall: 19:26 Yeah, absolutely. And we haven't talked much about the family of printers, and the printing press, and all of that, but I did want to shout out that at the end there is sort of like a found family scene. I enjoyed that. I always like like a shout out to found families.

Amanda Thrasher: 19:47 I Like a good found family, definitely.

Danielle Hall: 19:49 Hey.

Amanda Thrasher: 19:50 Hey.

Danielle Hall: 19:51 Let's talk about horse racing. So there's a horse race in this book.

Danielle Hall: 19:55 *singing* The race is a metaphor. *laughter* I wonder if Erin still listens to our podcast.

Amanda Thrasher: 20:01 I hope she does.

Danielle Hall: 20:02 Erin, if you're listening, we love you. So the most interesting part of this horse race for me, like, okay everybody, she's the protagonist, we all saw it coming, she wins the horse race. Except that they call it a tie because of course they have to, because racism.

Amanda Thrasher: 20:21 Yeah. Racism and sexism here because intersectionality.

Danielle Hall: 20:24 Oh yeah.

Amanda Thrasher: 20:25 So I thought it was great.

Danielle Hall: 20:27 It's like no matter how hard she works in her life the quote unquote "best she can hope for" is to tie the white guy.

Amanda Thrasher: 20:37 Yeah. So as I was reading, old Gin got hurt and could no longer race, I was reading, I was like, "Oh, is this going to happen? Is this ... Oh, it's happening." And then I felt just resignation and then I was like, "Okay, let's go with it," and then it worked out great. Did you not feel that? Were you like, "Oh, she's going to race. She's going to ... ah man. Like she's racing."

Danielle Hall: 20:55 I was along for the ride. It was great. Keep doing you Stacey Lee. Don't listen to these haters. *laughter*

Amanda Thrasher: 21:02 "These haters" being your one true love. *laughter*

Danielle Hall: 21:05 Well, not right now you're not. Just kidding. You are. You are always and forever. I love you. However you're wrong. This was great.

Amanda Thrasher: 21:13 That's fair. You're usually wrong so-

Danielle Hall: 21:17 All right-

Amanda Thrasher: 21:17 ... I'll accept the mantle just this once.

Danielle Hall: 21:20 Overall we enjoyed this book. We want more books like this. You need this book for your classroom library. You should also procure *Under a Painted Sky* by Stacy Lee, and *Outrun the Moon* by Stacey Lee. Just get them all.

Amanda Thrasher: 21:33 They're like Pokemon.

Danielle Hall: 21:35 Gotta catch 'em all.

Amanda Thrasher: 21:37 That's our show for today. 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 episodes book, *The Revolution of Birdie Randolph* by Brandy Colbert, via the link in our show notes. And if you're enjoying the show please leave us a review on iTunes or whatever various podcasting platforms there are in this wild world of ours.

Amanda Thrasher: 21:59 Happy reading!