

**YA Café Podcast**  
**Episode 63: *The Stars and the Blackness Between Them***  
**26 September 2019**

Danielle Hall: 00:00 Welcome to the YA Cafe, where we share conversations about books for teachers, readers, and caffeine addicts everywhere.

Danielle Hall: 00:07 On today's episode, we'll be talking about *The Stars and the Blackness Between Them* by Junauda Petrus. 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. We're joined today by Sam Smith, a writer, reader, and life blogger, and teacher.

Danielle Hall: 00:40 Hi Sam.

Sam Smith: 00:41 Hi. How are you? Nice to be back with you all again.

Danielle Hall: 00:44 We're doing great. You're back to school, doing the school thing. Do you have time for writing projects on the side, or are you pretty in school mode?

Sam Smith: 00:53 I'm pretty in school, but because it's really hard for me to write at home, I usually like stay after school, and write little bits and pieces of essays. That's kind of like my thing right now, not so much I'm focusing on a novel or anything, but just life essays, things that go on every day. I stay back and write those.

Danielle Hall: 01:13 Very cool. And if you ever do have a novel in the works, be sure to let us know.

Amanda Thrasher: 01:17 I think there's a podcast that might do it. I don't know.

Sam Smith: 01:21 Yeah, I am working on it. I've been working on this ending forever, guys. It's really shameful. I'll let you know more about that off air.

Amanda Thrasher: 01:41 The Stars and the Blackness Between Them, follows two girls, Audre and Mabel. Audre has just been sent to Minnesota from her home in Trinidad, after her mother found her with another girl. Mabel is ready to welcome her, but barely has the energy to enjoy much these days. After a startling diagnosis, Mabel counts on Audre for calm and peace. She also begins a correspondence with an imprisoned writer. It feels like these two people are alone in understanding her, and anchoring her to this life. Can the two girls shape happiness in the space and time they have left together? So Danielle, what did you think?

Danielle Hall: 02:11 So I really liked a lot of things about this book. I liked the two voices of the girls, Audre and Mabel. We start out in Trinidad, and so there was a really cool sense of place that we can talk more about. And I really liked these snippets of poetry in between chapters. Not every chapter, but Audre really likes astrology. So there's a poem to every sign in the Zodiac, and it's just a really cool touch. Junauda is definitely very talented in many different ways. She's also a filmmaker and a poet obviously, because there was poetry in this. And so I really liked all of those things. What about you Sam? What did you think?

Sam Smith: 02:58 I adored it for several different reasons. The first of which, so it was set in Trinidad and I'm not from Trinidad, but my family is from Jamaica and I was born in The Bahamas. So I definitely connected to that, just understanding, Audre's point of view, what it's like to be a Caribbean girl, and what that means in so many different aspects. I can't say that I adored the ending, but the whole book itself I really connected with, especially the dialect. I thought it was so cool, and I spent some time looking up lots of the words that were used, because in the Jamaican dialect there are lots of words that are kind of similar, but they don't mean the same thing.

Amanda Thrasher: 03:36 Like what? Can you give us an example?

Sam Smith: 03:38 She has to put me right on the spot. Okay. So on the first page where Audre is speaking it says, "My heart feeling like it get bust out for calling somebody mother a jagabat." And I've heard my father say that before and I remember being like, what the hell does that mean, right? So I looked it up, and just like also having that, not that my mother was anything like Audre's mother, as far as the violence is concerned. But there is definitely a sternness to a Caribbean mother. Caribbean parents in general that like you just kind of know not to mess with them, or it's going to be a problem. So that was interesting. What do you think, Amanda?

Amanda Thrasher: 04:18 Yeah, I liked it a lot too. I thought there were a lot of really great things about it. I thought the dialect was really well done. Some of the things that you mentioned were really great, especially in the Trinidad portions of setting you in Trinidad. But then also keeping that in Audre's narrative, just to remind you that she is adjusting and meeting these people, but she's still feeling very out of place in her father's home. I think all that really worked well together, and also Minnesota of all places to drag a Caribbean Island teenager.

Sam Smith: 04:47 Yes.

Danielle Hall: 04:47 So Junauda is from Minnesota. So there was that.

Amanda Thrasher: 04:51 So she's like I know this heat to freezing culture shock.

Danielle Hall: 04:54 Yeah! \*laughter\*

Danielle Hall: 04:56 So we didn't say this in the summary. I wrote the summary and I didn't include this, but Audre gets sent to live with her father, and her parents are divorced, and she's spent time with her father like a couple times a year and that's it.

Danielle Hall: 05:11 But for the times that he's on screen, he is very open to her. You know, she was basically exiled from Trinidad, because her mother found her in a sexy situation with a girl. And there's this violence and ripping her away from the girl, and then ripping her away from Trinidad. I was just so happy to see her dad support her, where her mother really hadn't.

Amanda Thrasher: 05:37 I really liked the dad and I liked Mabel's parents too. Like I thought that the parents in this were very three dimensional.

Danielle Hall: 05:44 And Audre has another really supportive, awesome figure in her life. And that is her grandmother Queenie, back in Trinidad. What did y'all think of Queenie?

Amanda Thrasher: 05:54 Oh, she's so perfect. She was like super necessary in the novel. I loved her presence in Trinidad.

Sam Smith: 06:00 Yeah. She reminded me of my own grandmother. She's not even really my grandmother, she's my stepmother's mother, but she's so much like Queenie. Like, she was the first person to be able to get through to me. My mom was very strict, hard-lined Caribbean parent. And my dad was just like, "Oh do whatever you want". So I kind of was just like a wild cat. But my grandmother was the first person to actually sit me down and say, "No, you know we're going to do things this way and not that way." And even in my adult life when something weird is happening or I need a dream interpretation, that's who I call. And so, it was cool to be able to resonate with that whole situation that Queenie and Audre had going on.

Danielle Hall: 06:39 That's really cool. Queenie really opens up the vision of this book about the discussion of the divine. Queenie is really a touchstone for Audre in learning about her own view of divinity and how she connects to the earth, and her ancestors, and herself. And a lot of that comes out through dreams, like you said, which become important later on in the book. And also the poetry related to the astrology, like we mentioned before. Sam, I feel like you had a quote here.

Sam Smith: 07:15 I did and it reads, "Audre, you're a wild nurturing. You are a complicated specialness. You are ancestral perseverance and sacred erotic." And that was so gripping. It's one of the points in the book where I was like, "Yes, I'm going to read this and I'm going to finish the whole thing tonight."

Danielle Hall: 07:35 Queenie is the person that Audre turns to first when we find out the story of this book, which is that Mabel has cancer. So usually we say this sort of thing in the spoiler section, but as a child who lost her parent to cancer, cancer books are very triggering to me and I did not know that this was a cancer book. So I just want to make sure that like everybody listening knows upfront. This is a cancer book. And when Mabel gets diagnosed, Queenie is the first person Audre calls. And it's just like, how do I heal her? And we definitely want to come back to that whole healing thing, and the notion of that in the spoiler section. But Queenie was definitely very, very central to Audre's processing of this news.

Danielle Hall: 08:28 In the beginning of this novel, there are a few very sexy scenes.

Amanda Thrasher: 08:34 There's like four in the first four chapters. And I was like, "Okay, all right." And that's another part of why I just felt so sucker punched by the cancer diagnosis. Because I thought it was going to be like a steamy, fun, romance book, and then it wasn't that.

Sam Smith: 08:48 I feel like we got all the sex in the beginning, and then we got all of the pure, real, puppy love, which is kind of like some of the most potent love in the latter part of the book, which was cool.

Amanda Thrasher: 09:00 Oh yeah definitely.

Danielle Hall: 09:02 Yeah, I mean I agree with you Sam. I think that it was intentional. It wasn't just uneven, it was intentionally done to make the second half of the book even more resonating, in terms of its purity. And its sort of like John Green has said about Looking for Alaska, about the juxtaposition between the sex scene, and the intimacy of conversation and things right after it.

Amanda Thrasher: 09:26 I think this is really different though because in Looking for Alaska, it's so awkward and unsexy, but these are sexy scenes, right?

Danielle Hall: 09:34 It's true. But I think that the juxtaposition serves a lot of the same thing.

Amanda Thrasher: 09:40 Were y'all kind of, I mean this might be a bad way to ask it but I'm going to ask it this way anyway, were you guys kind of disappointed when you realized it was a cancer book? Because I felt a little bit robbed of a sweet little romance between these two girls.

Sam Smith: 09:56 Yeah, I was like, "oh man. Come on, not Mabel". Like, maybe one of the other friends, and sorry other friends. \*laughter\*

Danielle Hall: 10:07 Yeah, I was disappointed. I don't know. I know that not every book can be everything, so not every contemporary book can be a sweet queer romance, but I don't know. I thought that there was already a lot? The cross cultural connections like the young women of color raised in very different upbringings, and all this cool pop culture references. I mean just to have the main conflict be cancer, cancer being the main antagonist, definitely disappointing for me.

Amanda Thrasher: 10:43 But it was still, we still really liked the book. Important to say. We just thought it was going to be a different book. So all of you, our savvy YA Podcast listeners, will not experience this sort

of disappointment because you will go in and say, I'm about to read a beautiful, artistic, cancer book. As opposed to, "I can't wait for this queer romance of the summer." Wrong. \*laughter\*

Danielle Hall: 11:06 Yes, that is a great way to put it. It's beautiful. It's artistic. It's evocative. And it's a cancer book. 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 Stars and the Blackness Between Them, and dig a little deeper.

Danielle Hall: 11:36 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 help keep our show going. Next up, we'll be discussing The Athena Protocol, by Shamim Sarif, a queer spy thriller, and you know we're here for that. We also have a list on our blog of other inclusive thrillers we know you'll enjoy. If you'd like to help us keep bringing you great content, order through the link in our show notes. Happy reading.

Amanda Thrasher: 12:15 Welcome back y'all. It's time for Things We Like a Latte. Danielle, what's your brew of choice this week?

Danielle Hall: 12:20 Well Amanda.

Amanda Thrasher: 12:20 Well Danielle.

Danielle Hall: 12:22 This is so ridiculous but we just got back from camping.

Amanda Thrasher: 12:25 Caaamping?

Danielle Hall: 12:25 Yeah, camping. I didn't use to say this word this way, but now being back in the Pacific Northwest, my vowels have broadened again. Caaamping. Anyway, we stayed in this cabin which had this beautiful view of a river, on a mountain. It was so lovely and rustic, except for probably a \$7000 hot tub.

Amanda Thrasher: 12:53 It was a very nice hot tub.

Danielle Hall: 12:56 I mean it broke me for all hot tubs ever, right? Because it's so nice. There was a recliner part where you could just recline and have jets on your calf muscles. Which is really great after you go running in the mountains and such. And so my Thing I Like a Latte, is this hot tub.

Amanda Thrasher: 13:18 It's the hot tub? It's not the night that I made you carry everything on your back and go into the wilderness and sleep in 30 degrees? That's not what you Like a Latte?

Danielle Hall: 13:26 No.

Amanda Thrasher: 13:27 Weird. \*laughter\*

Danielle Hall: 13:29 How about you Sam? What's your Brew of Choice?

Sam Smith: 13:32 This is tricky, but I think I'm going to have to say, this week my Brew of Choice is the veggie sandwich at Sprouts. I don't know if you guys have a Sprouts where you are.

Danielle Hall: 13:41 I've never even heard of Sprouts.

Amanda Thrasher: 13:42 Is it a chain?

Sam Smith: 13:44 It is. And there's one by my job so I'm there all the time. We had open house last week sometime, and one of the guys went out and got refreshments. And one of the sandwiches he had, for people like me who don't eat meat, he got a vegetable sandwich.

Danielle Hall: 13:58 Also people like us. Vegetarians unite.

Sam Smith: 14:00 All of us, woo hoo. And this vegetable sandwich was so good that I took my lunch break early last week, to go get it. I almost bought the ingredients today thinking, "oh, I'll make a vegetable sandwich when I get home from church"

Amanda Thrasher: 14:12 Won't be the same, you'll be bummed out.

Sam Smith: 14:14 Listen, I already knew, so I didn't even bother. I made a mental note, "I guess I'll buy another sandwich tomorrow." But that's what I Like a Latte.

Amanda Thrasher: 14:22 I like it. Sounds good,

Danielle Hall: 14:22 Me too.

Amanda Thrasher: 14:23 So my Brew of Choice this week is an older video game that I just finished playing through with Danielle. Just finished it. It is called Overcooked, and it is a cooperative video game in which you and your friends, the chef, have to save the Onion Kingdom. And there's a lot of food related puns. There's a lot of arguing about the best way to cook a burger because if you don't, then the monster's going to eat the Onion Kingdom and-

Danielle Hall: 14:50 Or the frying pan will catch on fire.

Amanda Thrasher: 14:51 Or the frying pan's going to catch on fire. It's a really fun game. I enjoyed it a lot. It's a simple mechanic. You can play with up to four people, and it's a really good cooperative game. And it's always nice to find another one of those. So Overcooked is my Brew of Choice.

Danielle Hall: 15:06 Love it.

Danielle Hall: 15:08 We're going to take a quick break and when we come back we'll return to our discussion on The Stars and the Blackness Between Them. The rest of the show may contain spoilers, so if you're leaving us here, keep in touch on Instagram and Twitter @yacafepodcast. We'll be back.



Amanda Thrasher: 15:39 Welcome back y'all to the YA Cafe. We're continuing our discussion on *The Stars and the Blackness Between Them*, by Junauda Petrus. If you haven't read this yet, we want to warn you again that this segment will contain spoilers.

Danielle Hall: 15:49 Spoilers and cancer. So the predominant question that we seek to answer, in books like this, is books about sick kids, who are they written for? And the answer is not always sick kids. Hannah Moskowitz has brought this up before. Particularly pertaining to *The Fault in Our Stars*, by John Green. Who is *The Fault in Our Stars*, written for? We talked about it with *Lovely, Dark and Deep*, by Justina Chen, which in my opinion is written for sick kids. And you know, is this book written for sick kids? Discuss.

Amanda Thrasher: 16:31 I've gone back and forth on this one. I think that any, we're in the spoiler section so I'm just going to say it, any book where the kids die at the end, I'm not sure it is for sick kids. We're going to talk more about the ending, but it is, more or less, a death ending. And truly, when we go through the book knowing that she's got this terminal disease, why do we have to take it all the way to the terminus? If you are truly trying to show like this slice of life, of living with and loving someone who is dying of a disease, if you are truly doing part of it for the people with these diseases, you don't have to go to the end. So I'm kind of back and forth on it. Not really sure.

Sam Smith: 17:10 I don't think I'm sure either. I think you make a really good point. If we knew that there was no coming back from it, I don't know how necessary it was for us to actually experience her being gone. Even in the fashion that she left. I guess someone would argue that this is reality, right? That some sick kids don't make it, but I don't know. Like, if I knew a kid that was sick and they read this book, how would they feel after? Maybe it would give them some hope considering how things were played out in this story, even though she doesn't get better, there is a lot of color in her world still.

Amanda Thrasher: 17:44 Yeah. I think the biggest thing that makes it feel not for sick kids, like I said, is just the very ending. But like you said, there's a lot of color and a lot of love in her life through the book beforehand, which is really great. To see her still living this life just in a different way.

Danielle Hall: 18:02 Yeah, and one of the things that I found was really powerful about this book, compared to some of the other books that I've read, is the way in which her friends loved her and respected her. Because when Mabel got sick, she did not have the energy to maintain the friendships that she had had before. She wanted to be close to Audre, and that's basically all she wanted. And her other friends, no one came on screen and was like, "Why aren't you being friends with me?" No one demanded anything of her. It was very clear that they loved her, and that someone had told them like, "Hey, she's got other things to worry about right now." And so in that, in that not putting guilt on

Mabel or an emotional burden on her, I think that that was really well done, and contributed to this depiction of a life with cancer. But in regards to what you're saying, Sam, I think this would be a really hard book for a sick kid to read.

Sam Smith: 19:05 I feel the same way.

Danielle Hall: 19:07 So there was this moment, when Mabel first gets diagnosed, that Audre wanted healing for Mabel. Like of course she wanted healing for Mabel, and she reached out to Queenie and they develop this connection, Queenie and Mabel, through what Audre calls Dreamo.

Amanda Thrasher: 19:28 It felt like the point of view got a little splintered. It felt like, when we would follow the Dreamo into some of Queenie's memories, while I liked them, I feel like I didn't quite understand how they fit the flow of the novel. But I liked them all on their own merits. I didn't understand what made them necessary for Mabel. She had this connection to Whitney Houston or whatever, which was very important for Mabel. But I don't know why these dream sequences were important to Mabel. And I feel like having them, really made me less receptive to her relationship with the inmate, which I thought made a lot of sense and I thought it was really strong. But I was less willing to go on that ride, because I had already gone with all these Queenie memories that didn't seem to fit.

Sam Smith: 20:18 Yeah, I agree. I pretty much feel the exact same way. And again, they were amazing and beautiful, and I especially love the language like I told you guys before. But I wanted to kind of stay with Mabel and Audre, now that you say it that way.

Amanda Thrasher: 20:32 What did you think of it, Danielle?

Danielle Hall: 20:34 Well, I finished this book like two weeks ago, and I still haven't really sorted out my feelings on these sequences. One thing that I feel Mabel got from them, was the ability to live outside of her own narrative for a few minutes, more than a few minutes, really, she talked about the extensive passage of time while she was sharing these memories. And I think that that was a relief for her to see these memories that were happy or that were energetic, or other things that weren't the illness that she was currently suffering from. Particularly because she was in a lot of pain, and so to be transported for a few minutes, I think was really important to her.

Sam Smith: 21:22 Yeah, and now that I'm thinking about it, since Audre herself didn't feel confident enough, or didn't have the power maybe, to heal Mabel herself. And she was kind of working through the power

that Queenie had, made sense that Mabel and Queenie had that connection, since Queenie's wisdom was the one doing all the healing.

Amanda Thrasher: 21:42 Yeah, that could be. One thing I liked about these memories that we got through the D reamo, like I said, even though I felt like they were out of the story, I really enjoyed them on their own. I really like anything that is a good reminder that queerness did not get invented in the mid-eighties. I really like this idea of, people have been queer as long as there have been people, and people from Trinidad had been queer as long as there have been people from Trinidad. I really liked that there was some of that connection in this book. I always appreciate that.

Danielle Hall: 22:14 Me too. I like seeing that. And this also is this moment where we start to think about, similar to in *Lovely, Dark and Deep*, what does healing mean? In this book, I don't feel like there's any moment in which we think that Mabel is going to make it.

Danielle Hall: 22:32 So when we're talking about healing, we're talking about finding a sense of acceptance, calm, contentment in the present even knowing that your future has been truncated. Perhaps beginning to imagine like an afterlife, what that would look like for you. Things like that. So it's not like healing, like, "Oh, she's going to get better from cancer." Because it's never suggested that that's going to happen.

Amanda Thrasher: 22:59 That's part of why I feel that the relationship from the inmate is so successful, because they both have this death sentence, that is either a little bit of time or a lot of time, and nobody can really tell them. Because on one hand, because cancer's terrible, on the other hand because the justice system is terrible. I'm always going to be a sucker for the broken justice system and the immorality of the death penalty. I'm always here for that. So that's an easy win for me. But I really liked that she was able to develop this relationship with this other person who was experiencing a different thing. Like, "You're in pain everyday and trying to figure out how to live a life. I'm in prison every day and trying to figure out how to live a life." And being able to build that relationship I thought was really cool.

Sam Smith: 23:41 I agree, that it was important. It was also kind of triggering for me, because the students that I work with, a lot of those kids are system-impacted. They've been in the juvenile justice system and stuff like that,. So, just reading that, and also my oldest brother was in prison for quite some time, so it was just like, "Ooh, ouch." Reality again. Right on top of that cancer, blah.

Amanda Thrasher: 24:06 It's a lot of hard things all thrown together.

- Sam Smith: 24:08 Yes.
- Danielle Hall: 24:10 Which brings us to talking about the end. For brave listeners who have come this far without actually reading the book, Mabel uses her Make-A-Wish thing, to wish for this inmate's freedom. She of course is not granted that. But they do let him go to Coney Island with her for a day, and they ride on a roller coaster, just the two of them. And when the car returns, no one's in it. That's the end.
- Sam Smith: 24:42 I don't even know why to say because I was like, "Really?"
- Amanda Thrasher: 24:46 Right? It felt like such a cop out. It felt like, I want her to die, but I don't want to write her dying, or like actually show her dying. And then a little bit before that, this kind of flew all over me. How Audre gets this letter from her girlfriend in Trinidad, and it's like, "Oh, I'm okay and I still love you," and blah blah blah. And that just crawled all over me, because I felt like don't worry about Audre, she's got this chick on a back-burner for as soon as Mabel dies. I don't know. That's how I took it, and I did not like it.
- Danielle Hall: 25:17 I liked some aspects of the ending. I decided that I was going to read this optimistically, and take it that Mabel had gotten to the full actualization of her healing, and that she had transcended this mortal coil. Which I agree, is easier to write than a death scene. But I feel that it is inherently optimistic as an ending. There's no suggestion that she's not dead, but there is this sort of magical realism field that she has transcended into the space of the divine, which has been important throughout the whole book. So it's not like it came from nowhere. This book is firmly rooted in a perception of divinity and healing, and so is the end.
- Sam Smith: 26:06 Yeah, I agree. It really put me in the mind of Toni Morrison and her African flying people. I think that was kind of in line with the rest of the spiritual aspect of the book, especially as it pertained to African spirituality. Because that's the direction I took it in, even though I did not like it.
- Amanda Thrasher: 26:25 I would have really liked it, if the last chapter had been Mabel's last chapter. Where they're riding the roller coaster, and then she's got like this overwhelming rush, and that could have been the end of the book and nothing would have been lost.
- Danielle Hall: 26:39 I can see that. So it's a matter of whose perspective it was.

Sam Smith: 26:44 Yeah, the last person to speak in the book was Audre.

Amanda Thrasher: 26:47 And I really do like the last page of Audre's memories, or whatever. And I feel like we could have just cut out the first couple paragraphs, where she talks about "the handcuffs dangling from the lap bar and they're gone, no one could explain it." I think that just like having it be this personal, spiritual explosion for Mable, going over the roller coaster. And then the next thing is like Audre reflecting on her being gone, would have been fine.

Danielle Hall: 27:12 Ah, so instead of reflecting on a very concrete, "Oh we see the lap bar with the handcuffs dangling," just have a goneness in the future?

Amanda Thrasher: 27:22 Yeah.

Danielle Hall: 27:23 Interesting.

Amanda Thrasher: 27:25 But you know, it's not my book, obviously. It is Junauda Petrus' book.

Danielle Hall: 27:30 Not every book is for every person.

Amanda Thrasher: 27:31 Not every book.

Amanda Thrasher: 27:32 But this book was great.

Sam Smith: 27:34 This book is fantastic. I would recommend it. And as a matter of fact, I think I'm going to bring it to school so that a couple of my students can read it. Yeah.

Amanda Thrasher: 27:40 Nice.

- Danielle Hall: 27:41      Excellent. Overall, *The Stars and the Blackness Between Them*, is an evocative reading experience, with lush imagery and excellent detail and characterization. And a recommendation from us.
- Danielle Hall: 27:54      And that's our show for today, friends. Thank you so much for joining us, Sam.
- Sam Smith: 27:59      Thank you for having me. It's always a fantastic time.
- Danielle Hall: 28:03      You can find Sam on Instagram, @samsmithwriter, or at her blog at SamSmithWriter.com. You can find us on Instagram and Twitter, @yacafepodcast. We'd love to hear from you. And if you're enjoying the show, please consider leaving us a review. Happy reading.