Transcription for Episode 22: Amanda Nelson Interview

Episode Duration: 1:08:07

JENN: This is Jenn, and I'm welcoming you to the latest episode of Minorities in Publishing, and I am really appreciative of her time to take a time out to Skype with me: Miss Amanda Nelson. I think many of you may know her of Book Riot Fame. She's the managing editor, and she does not hold back in her thoughts.

AMANDA: That's true. [laughter] I thoroughly appreciate it. Thank you.

JENN: You're everywhere, Amanda. You're basically a huge fan of literature, and you speak very openly about feminism, the lack of diversity, just what's wrong with literature. But you still have a deep affinity for it, too.

AMANDA: Yeah, yeah.

JENN: To be able to appreciate it in all forms, not just, "Oh, I don't like things by white, straight straight men." But you love you work. Period.

AMANDA: Yes.

JENN: Because of that love, you read voraciously. Being the managing editor of Book Riot, you get to discuss books, and it's very evident – that's what I've been saying – your capacity for adoring books, being very critical of them, just being a very literate person. So where did this love of books stem for you, and did it lead you on a path to want to become someone who reads and discusses books and literary culture? Or was your work with Book Riot something that came up abruptly in your life?

AMANDA: Well, I think my love of reading came from growing up poor in the country and having nothing else to do, to be honest. I grew up in southeastern Virginia in the middle of nowhere, so I didn't have a lot of friends. My parents didn't have a lot of money, so what I did was I went to the school library like you do and just read everything I could take home because it was free and that sort of got me down the path of being a reader. From that point on I had teachers and librarians and school librarians who encouraged me and directed me and were really great about always putting a book in my hand. And once they figured out that I was reading at a higher reading level, they never stopped me, like sometimes teachers or parents can get kind of not fearful but anxious that kids are gonna read something that's gonna mess with their brains. But that never happened, so I was free to just keep going, and I did. Once I started reading, I

always loved it. I actually started a blog about classic literature called Dead White Guys a couple of years ago. [laughter] I know. And that's how I started in the book world. I just went looking online for blogs about the classics because that's mostly what I was reading when I was coming out of college, and I couldn't find any blogs that were funny. They were all just super serious and academic and dry and just kind of saying the same things over and over again. Nobody was willing to criticize these books or think about them like a new way, so I thought, “I'll try. I'll try writing a blog about this stuff. I'll just see what happens.” At first I wrote anonymously because I knew that a young girl's opinion about Charles Dickens was probably not going to be received well on the Internet. So I was anonymous for a while, but then I got tired of that because I'm just not the kind of person to hide behind what I'm trying to say. I eventually told everybody who I was and changed my Twitter avatar to my face and whatnot. Through that blog I met Jeff O'Neill, who was one of the founders of Book Riot, who also started book blogging at about the same time that I did, and we found each other on Twitter and were reading each other’s stuff and really liked it and all that. When he started Book Riot, he asked me to be one of the original contributors, and from there, I became a contributing editor. I was part-time, and then I was full-time, and now I'm running it on the day to day. I wouldn't say it was abrupt because I certainly was in the world when Book Riot started, but it wasn't anything I planned either. I had a history during college, where I was working a series of really horrible customer service jobs out of college because of the Recession, and I couldn't find a job in the field, so it was a combination of luck and building something out of nothing. That was a really long answer. [laughter]

JENN: And you never wanted to come to New York City to do more with books since this is kind of the publishing hub?

AMANDA: It is. And no offense, but like I really intensely dislike being in New York. I know this is an unpopular opinion, but it’s just loud and there’s a lot of people and I’m used to, like I said, grew up in the middle of nowhere. I'm used to, at the most, suburban traffic. Here, I can get to anywhere within 10 minutes, and in New York everything takes forever. I couldn't. I was actually talking about it with my husband the other day: “You know, if Book Riot ever sells in publishing, and I have to go move to New York, I might become a nurse. I might quit the book world and go do something entirely different because I don't know if I could handle living in New York.” I don't know. We'll see. Maybe I'll change my mind down the road, but, no, I never I never thought about coming up there. I don't think I could handle the big city.

JENN: So with Book Riot abruptly starting, it sounds like it snowballed. You guys actually have a conference happening.

AMANDA: We do! Book Riot Live! Everyone come in November!

JENN:Yes, in New York City, funnily enough.

AMANDA: Yes, I know. [laughter] A lot of our stuff is in New York, and you know what it's like.

JENN: It's a quick plug and we'll plug it again. Speaking of Book Riot, you know that I am a huge fan of the diversity FAQs you, Swapna, and previous guest Preeti did earlier this year, and I'll make sure to re-link to them again because they came out early this year, about January, February. I just adored the questions you came up with and also each of your distinct responses. How did that come about, and did you find that it was hard to pitch that, or basically with Book Riot there are no borders in terms of this discussion and how important it is?

AMANDA: Well, there aren't any. My supervisor, I guess, you'd say is Rebecca Schinsky and then Jeff O'Neill is our CEO and editor-in-chief, and they both care about the issue of diversity as much as I do. The diversity FAQs came about because we got really tired of answering the same questions over and over again, like you do with any FAQ.

JENN: Oh my god, you should see what's in the We Need Diverse Books Tumblr.

AMANDA: I'm sure. Sometimes they Tumble stuff they get in their inbox, and I'm just like, "Oh gosh, you guys are so brave, the lot of you." But, yeah, we had started writing more about racial diversity on the site. We'd always been pretty good about writing about gender inequality in publishing, and then as the staff became more and more aware of racial diversity issues in publishing, we started talking about it more on the site. We are, first of all, readers, and so the site Book Riot is really an extension of our reading lives as the staff and contributors of Book Riot. So as we became more aware of the issue we started writing more about the issue, and our readers were asking the same things over and over again, like saying, "I just want to read a good story. I don't care about the gender of the author or the race of the author. Isn't paying attention to an author's race in and of itself racist?" You know, those kinds of things that people say. "What about different kinds of diversity?" "What about LGBTQ and disabled people?" The questions could be annoying if you've been thinking about the topic for any length of time.

JENN: You feel like you're consistent educators.

AMANDA: Exactly, but our readers weren't asking out of a place of being snide. They really wanted to know. They care about inequality, but they also feel kind of squicky about Googling whether or not an author is black. That makes them feel weird because of what we've taught people about race in this country and how you're supposed to be quote unquote colorblind and all that. So I said to Rebecca, "Why don't we do something about this?" We get the same questions over and over. I made a text expander. Text expanders, I think it's a Mac app where you can type in a longer answer or a long text block and then make a shortcut. So your bio, your name, the word "Book Riot." I actually had text expanders for answers for people who would ask these questions over and over again in our comment section. I got so tired of it. I was just like, "You know, we should get some of the contributors of color together and address these once and for all. And then when we get the questions in the future, we can just say, "That's a great question. We address that in part one of our diversity FAQ. Here's a link." And then I don't have to answer them anymore. It was really born out irritation of, like you said, being a constant educator. Rebecca thought it was a great idea, so I asked Swapna and Preeti if they would help

me because they had both been vocal about the topic individually, on their own Twitters, on their own blogs, of their own accord. They were more than happy to. We use Slack, which is another app. We started a secret diversity brown person Slack channel, and we still have it. It turned out really well.

JENN: Do you think you'll do another one? Or did you pretty much hit all the main questions?

AMANDA: I think all of the questions that we get in mass, and the conversation, I do feel like there's a shift in the conversation. Now people are starting to be more open to the idea of actually paying attention to what they're reading, which was a big barrier for readers when we first started having conversations at the beginning of the year. But if we start getting new questions right now, I'm noticing that – whenever we have one of our contributors who is transgender talk about their reading life and how books have impacted their reading life as a transgender person, we get a lot more questions that, on the surface, sound not snide but kind of ignorant. I don't mean that as an insult. They just don't know, and instead of Googling, they're asking Book Riot, which is kind of odd. So we might do something with LGBTQ issues in the future as we get more questions about that. But that's the first time I've said that out loud, so we'll see.

JENN: Yeah, because it becomes a kind of slippery slope with the diversity because some people just don't like the word diversity. They feel like it's lost momentum in terms of what it means and how distinctive it is in terms of those being represented or not represented, I should say. It becomes kind of hard to be like, "This is about diversity." "Well, you know who you forgot?"

AMANDA: That was the hardest part of our diversity FAQ, when we were talking about the question of what about other kinds of diversity and our answers were essentially that all kinds of diversity are important. Of course we want LGBT people represented in our literature, and we want First Nations people represented and people differently abled and neuroatypical. All of these people need to be represented in literature. Everyone deserves to see themselves represented in literature. But what we're talking about right now are ways to combat racism and publishing. Discussing all these other forms of diversity is important, but that doesn't move the needle in this specific thing that we're trying to combat right now. That really irritated a lot of people, I think, because people want to feel like their personal issue is important or that their personal representation is important, and it totally is. I really hope we didn't come off as belittling any groups' representation because we do value all of it. But that FAQ was specifically done to address this one thing. It is hard when you're trying to talk about diversity as a model and try not to leave anyone out when there are so many different kinds of people, which is sort of a point.

JENN: I love it, and I think it's a fantastic resource for people to have, to just have a blunt conversation without being mean but being direct. I think that's the only way you could really talk about this, is being direct, but it's funny because people have also brought up the whole thing of holding people with kid gloves, so to speak, kind of talking around racism, but because you don't want to say racism because then someone will be like, "Oh, I'm checking out right now."

AMANDA: “Yeah, I’m not racist.”

JENN: “I'm not sexist. I'm not racist. I’m not agist.” As soon as you use the “-ist” someone just shuts down. Did you find that even though the tone was fun and good natured but direct, that people were still like, “How dare you?”

AMANDA: Yeah, totally. We do get that, especially when that first one went up. We did get a lot of that exact response: “I'm not racist. How could you possibly think that just because I don't pay attention to what I'm reading that I'm racist?” You got to kind of walk people through and say, “Look, I'm not saying that you are racist. I'm saying you were passively participating in a racist system.” It's not that you yourself think the people of color are worse off or worse people than you. It's that this is a system that the publishing industry and us as readers have created together, and we've got to pay attention if we're gonna fix it. So many people read for escapism, which is fine, but that means that it's not a thing they think about. It’s not a thing that they want to put work into because it's just the thing they do to get out of their day, which I got, but you know, I care more about fixing racism than I care about your escapism. Sorry, not sorry. [laughter] But I also got the opposite criticism. I did get people who were saying that the FAQ answers were too nice or that there was one particular question that was like, “What if I just don't have time to pay attention to the race of the person that I read?” And my answer was something like, “Well, do it when you have time.” I don't even know how to handle that question really because if you don't have space in your brain, you don't have space in your brain. No one's gonna make you. No one was gonna come to your house, like the Diversity Police, and attack your bookshelves. [laughter] And some people felt like I was letting people off the hook with that answer of “Do it when you feel like it.” I guess it could be interpreted that way, but I didn't mean it like that. I mentioned it like, “I don't know what to tell you. If you want to make an excuse, make an excuse. I don't know.”

JENN: It's such a weird thing to say, “I don't have time to pay attention to someone's race.” And that's an odd question to me. I wouldn't know how to answer that.

AMANDA: I mean it takes like a second to Google a person. I don't know. [laughter] But then it's like a thing that you then have to pay attention to. I kind of understand the question. It’s like, I compare it to when I decided to start being more environmentally conscious, like paying more attention to my carbon footprint or whatever. It just takes up more space in your head. You have to think more about the choices that you're making and all of that. But that's the price of being a responsible citizen of the planet. The price of being a responsible reader is paying attention. And if you don't want to do that, then you don't do it, and I don't have an answer for you. That’s your own choice that you have to deal with in your own mind, with your own conscience. It's not my problem.

JENN: So with these the consistency of the questions you're getting about diversity… I don't want to say it's rising in importance because it's always been important, but it's such a consistent conversation for the past year and a half. I feel like being on social media, that I said

this before on the podcast that you don't get away from the diversity discussion nowadays. It's not, "Oh, it was here for three months. We're not talking about it. Okay, it came back. Okay, now it's gone." You know it's not coming in and out like platform shoes or something.

AMANDA: [laughter] Yeah.

JENN: Or Mary Janes or whatever.

AMANDA: It's not a trend.

JENN: But why do you think, even with social media, and social media has been around for a good decade – plus it's not as though social media is new– but why do you think that it took so long for this discussion to hit reality and to take root and to take hold, that it's not going away?

AMANDA: I think that it was probably book blogging honestly. Before, when it was just traditional media covering books, you had essentially just white men telling people what to read and what was important in literature, what we should be paying attention to. I mean, that's not. of course, entirely true. People always want to talk about Kakutani at the *New York Times*, like we got one brown person, so diversity is not a problem. [laughter] But when book blogging became a thing that a lot of people were doing, I think it was really a place that women and people of color especially went to talk about their own reading interests, which worked the same as what was being discussed in the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* or wherever. And so as book blogging became more and more a thing that people were paying attention to and that readers specifically were paying attention to, it just kind of snowballed. So now blogs are more – or even BookTube or Twitter– is more where people are getting Book recommendations and hearing all this word of mouth. And since the blogosphere and YouTube are overwhelmingly female that makes the difference. I don't remember who I was talking to this about, but I saw this rant on Twitter about Jonathan Franzen, and of course, Jonathan Franzen famously dislikes social media in general. And the thing that occurred to me, because I was trying to think about why that bothers me so much, why do I care whether this author likes it or doesn't, and Jonathan Franzen is held up as this great critic of American culture and thinker about American culture. But if you can't understand that social media and the blogosphere are where people who have traditionally been marginalized go to to speak and to get their voices heard and that's not a thing that occurs to you, then I can't really trust your general opinions about culture in this country because you don't understand something like this fundamental thing that's happening. But I think it's the same in books, so as the people who were talking about books, as that group of people became more diverse, the conversation just naturally became something that people were forced to pay attention to, and that just kept happening. It kept happening, and now you're seeing things, like in my case, where a blogger turned into a person running a big media company, and that's happened. And it's not just me. You know, like Ashley Ford is over at Lit Hub and all these people who started off a couple of years ago just writing about books wherever they could online are now in these positions of having platforms. We won't stop talking about it, so there it is.

JENN: Yeah, I'm glad the conversation is being consistent, but it's also interesting. You can't talk about the upswing without the backlash, so to speak. We're constantly talking about it. Like Ashley Ford said a couple episodes ago, people say, “Are we still talking about that? Didn’t that get solved? Why are you guys harping on that?” It's weird that even with the conversation, there are still people who feel, I even noticed it in my Facebook feed, of how people get really quiet when I point out specific diversity things. But look at this bundt cake I made, and *that* gets a response.

AMANDA: Of course, yeah. It's the same thing. Our comments on the site are generally really great, the readers who comment on Book Riot itself. Facebook could be a little bit more of a minefield, but, yeah, we posted just the other day, some one of our contributors did review of *Go Set a Watchmen*, and she was talking about racism and Atticus Finch. And probably a fifth of the comments were like, “Why are we still talking about this? Why are we still talking about racism? Why are we still talking about whether or not it's okay to read a book with a racist in it? Why can't I just read what I want?” And I was just like “Really? Are you guys even Book Riot? Are you new here?” You know, why are *you* still asking that question? I created another text expander that was like, “This is this is an issue Book Riot cares about and always cared about and will continue to care about. If this bothers you find another site to read.” I have to continually say that over and over again, which shouldn't surprise me, but it kind of does. I wanted sometimes just to shake people, like this is such an important thing, and it will continue to be important. And we're not going to stop talking about it until it's not an issue anymore. Who knows when that will be, so strap in because this is what we're here for now.

JENN: It was actually via your tweets because I read Ta-Nehisi Coates’ book. There were ARCs at Book Expo, and I made sure to stand in line to get one. And it was via your tweets that I started seeing more about people's reaction to his book, which surprised me. I was kind of in la la land, like everyone's just gonna love this book.

AMANDA: I know, I thought the same thing.

JENN: It's the feel good book of the year. [laughter] This is definitely beach reading.

AMANDA: At the pool. You could use your beach towel to dry your tears. [laughter]

JENN: But you were pointing out how people were reacting to it, how people were offended by it or people weren't ready for that commentary. So with there being so few diverse book reviewers, this book is representative of how few we have, that people are looking at it with a very narrow view and not really understanding what Coates is trying to say or is saying very blatantly. Do you feel as though a place like Book Riot needs to take a stand on this? Not just because that's what you guys are about, but because no one else was talking about it. Do you have any hope for that?

AMANDA: Yeah, I do feel that way. We actually had a conversation in the back channels on Slack when Kakutani’s review came out. She dismissed it as like, “Why doesn't he have more

hope? After all, we have a black president." And it was just this like horribly tone deaf thing, which you're not used to from her. She's usually smarter than that but whatever. And so on Book Riot's back channels, the staff was like, "Why did they not have a black person review this book?" Why didn't they have Roxane Gay come in? We all sat around for a second trying to think of somebody else who we would want to see review it. And we couldn't think of anyone else. Is Roxane Gay all we can come up with? Is that the biggest name of a black writer right now who could review this book? And that was such a lightbulb moment for us. There are so few people of color in this world, and of course we know that, like we objectively know it, but stuff like that just brings it up. And the *Economist* review was anonymous, so you can't say for certain that the reviewer was white, but obviously that reviewer was white, like obviously. And then David Brooks is weird. I mean, all of his op-eds are weird, but his weird op-ed about "What about white people's response to it?" It took me a week before I saw a review from a black reviewer, which is so strange to me. That really got me thinking more about how in legacy media, at the *Economist* or in the *Times*, there's such a dearth of reviewers of color. It's just so white. Why are they all so white? It doesn't make any sense to me. Book Riot definitely feels like that specific issue of not having more people of color speaking about books is a problem. And so for our last open call – we do an open call every spring – we specified we want people of color. We want women and we want LGBTQ people to apply. And when we were going through the applications, that was basically what we were looking for. We were looking really to diversify our own contributor stable because we can talk about books by authors of color with characters of color all day long, but if we're not also doing something to give our platform to people from marginalized groups, then we're not doing our part as a company. So that was something that we really tried to do this go around and will continue to try to do so in the future. I don't know if we're leading the way. I don't really see anyone else doing this really, but I'm not inside everyone else's hiring meetings. I hope they are.

JENN: I see people do open calls, but they're not necessarily specifying they want more diverse people. Some things are anonymous.

AMANDA: I saw Coffeehouse is hiring an editorial assistant. They're an indie press – excuse me, a small publisher, and I saw their advertisement today or yesterday, and they said at the end, "We are open to diversity. Minorities come apply." I thought that was really neat because you don't really see that a lot from a publisher.

JENN: It's funny because you feel as though you shouldn't need to say that. But it's good that people are emphasizing it, especially with writers of color. "We want more people of color!" You have to be active about it. Don't just say it because it's the hot thing to say right now. Mean it, please.

AMANDA: Yeah, it's tough. We got 1600 applications, and so I started to notice, this is just me, personally, I'm not speaking for editors everywhere, but I started to notice that the voice that I was being most drawn to was always quirky white women in their late twenties. So I had to take a step back and think about what is it about me as an editor that is automatically drawn to that voice. And I was going into the applications blind. I wasn't looking at names or Twitter profiles or

anything. I was opening just the writing samples and reading them, and then I'd be like, “Oh, I really like this.” I’d go back and look and inevitably it was some white blogger from New York with an MFA who was twenty-seven. Why does this keep happening to me? What is it about me? So I had to sit and think about that for a long time to figure out what is it about my own personal bias, even as somebody who deeply cares about this, that is making this happen. Even though we are already trying to diversify our contributor core, I needed to try harder. I had to make this giant effort. It’s kind of worrisome that even if somebody who deeply cares about it, if I'm not on top of myself, even my first action is gonna be to gravitate towards a white voice. It's internalized. It's the universal voice to me, just like it is to most people. Book media people have to try really hard to overcome that.

JENN: It's also that makes me wonder about the learning curve, not just for you as hiring manager, but in terms of the voice that these groups are instructed,if it's an inherent voice or they're adopting a voice they know works. In terms of color, it might just be, “I'm a serious person. I know serious topics.” Maybe someone who's white, just very lighthearted, you know, world is awesome and sunny all the time.

AMANDA: Yeah, like a Zooey Deschanel. [laughter]

JENN: [laughter] Well, maybe I’m harsh and analytical. And they’re like, “Ooh, I want to laugh.”

AMANDA: Well, the Book Riot voice tends to be really irreverent and just kind of like goofy and fun. It was that exactly. I was gravitating towards submissions from people that were like, “I am Zooey Deschanel with a writing sample.” Because that’s just the kind of thing I like, I guess. I'm not sure if it's inherent. Obviously white people aren’t a monolith any more than minorities aren’t. This is such a rabbit hole that I’m going down right now, but when people say they just want to read a good book and don't want to pay attention to a person's race, what I think that usually means is that they want to read something that is familiar to the way that they sound in their head. When a white person says, “I just want to read a good book,” what they mean is, “I want to read a book by someone who sounds like me.” They don't mean “good,” like the words are put together nicely and the pacing is really good and the symbolism makes a lot of sense and the characterization is awesome. What they mean is, “I'm forty and from Minnesota, and I want to read a book or somebody who sounds like a forty year old from Minnesota.” My mom is white, and I was raised by my mom and my stepdad, who was white, and so when I would sit down in my chair and wanted to be comfy and read a thing that tickles my fancy, it's gonna be from white people, unless I pay attention. That even extends to reading applications. But now that I know that, of course, I can work against it. But it was eye opening.

JENN: That’s awesome that you actually noticed that and caught yourself in that because I think many people don't, including minorities. I don't want to speak for the minority culture or don’t let me be your representative. I think the same thing. I might gravitate more to someone of color and not notice that I might just be like, “I only want to read stuff by black people” and that's not necessarily a bad thing, but what about East Asians or Native Americans? Things like that, so there could be a kind of narrowing of the mindset, various ways in which you're comfortable with

or even being educated and being taught to embrace nineteenth century England English literature. You're automatically like, "Okay, this is what I was taught to embrace."

AMANDA: "This is what's good."

JENN: Yeah, this is what I was taught to embrace. I do love Steinbeck, but I also love Toni Morrison, and I also love Zora Neale Hurston and Baldwin and things like that. So we need to branch out on all sides.

AMANDA: It's also a thing about why Americans don't really read a lot in translation. There's that famous figure of only 3% of the books published in the US are in translation, and it's only 1% of fiction published in the US is in translation. I'm one of the judges for the Best Translated Book Award of 2016, so I'm surrounded right now. I'm in piles of books and translation, and it's very uncomfortable to read books in translation for days and days. It's not a thirty year old woman from Virginia. It's a sixty year old man from Turkey writing a short story about places in Turkey I have never heard of in this voice that I don't really get. It's a very American problem.

JENN: Even when I read the translation of certain stories in the *New Yorker*, which does a lot of translations or gotten compilations of translated works from Mexico, like this is different. It's very cerebral. [laughter]

AMANDA: Yeah, and it's even little stuff like the cadence of the sentences is different.

JENN: The way different people plot. There might just not be a plot whatsoever. Where's the plot? We just end on kittens. That's how it ends. [laughter] I agree that it is an American problem because the diversity problem, some have said is an American problem, too.

AMANDA: I believe it. When we did the diversity FAQ, we would get comments from readers from other countries who were like, "I don't understand this at all. I don't understand this problem. I don't understand why you had to do this series. I don't get your answers." I remember that Jeff and I had to get in the comments to be like, "Well, it's a really American thing." Especially not just how white publishing is, but how few black people are in publishing, not just minorities in general. Let me give you an American history lesson about this country and how it's such a horrible thing that we've ignored for so long. We'd have readers in France who were like, "I don't understand why people in America don't read authors or color." "Look, slavery. Two hundred years of Jim Crow." I can't explain all this to you, sorry. Yeah, you've got your own share of issues over there, thank you very much, but it's definitely worse here.

JENN: So with that in mind, as a parent, what do you provide your kids in terms of a knowledge of potential love of books and seeing themselves in these stories, as well as embracing others people's stories, so that they get a wider outlook of society? Do you find that that's been hard or that it's getting easier to find material for your kid? People have been saying it's been getting better. Everyone says it's get it's getting better. Do you find that, in terms of the book that you get for your kids?

AMANDA: I do think it's getting better. My boys are four and when I first started looking for books for them, I couldn't really find anything with any characters who weren't white, so I just started getting them books with animals as the main character, with trains. You know, because I just didn't want to deal with that problem. Like, we just read Thomas the Train. We'll deal with this one. Instead I focus more on making sure that the people they were associating with in real life were a diverse group. So they go to the sitter and the other kids who go to their sitter, it's a really diverse bunch. We go to a very diverse church, so they hang out. Their best friends are a really diverse group of kids and families. They're starting to pay attention to it, and they're starting to notice that somebody's skin is darker than theirs or that somebody's skin is way lighter than theirs. So when I take them to the library, and you sit in the kid's section, I just pick out books with covers with kids who are from all different places and look different and make sure that we take them home and that they read them. Some publishers have been really great about sending them to me, like Candlewick sent me a box of kids books with all sorts of diverse characters because they know it's the thing I care about because I've complained about it on social media about not being able to find books for my boys to read. I do think it's getting better because now I notice that I could go to the library and very easily find a book about a little girl growing up in China and a book about a little boy growing up in Mexico. I'm hoping it's a thing that my boys don't have to think about. They just accept that there are all kinds of different people, that differences are awesome and are things to talk about and embrace and celebrate/ That's what I do. I make them read the books I pick. [laughter]

JENN: But you're doing it in a good way, the way you're doing it. The parents will take those books out of the hands, and say, "You don't want to read about Native American kids."

AMANDA: Oh, no. Please read about Native Americans.

JENN: Yes, written by Native Americans, preferably.

AMANDA: Yes, it's harder to find.

JENN: Much harder to find. So if you don't mind, I'd like to discuss some of the trolling that you've experienced, unfortunately. You're very vocal about gender equality, as well as racial equality, it has been established. But why do you think people respond so negatively to someone talking about a reality? And it becomes vicious, though. But it's become vicious that people actually tried to copy your Twitter account.

AMANDA: Oh. yeah. An imposter me.

JENN: With this reaction, does it motivate you more or does it give you pause? Like, "Wow, this really doesn't make sense."

AMANDA: There are days. Let me think of an example. I think it was right after Ferguson. Rebecca said something on Twitter about how there was a conservative author who writes

military, kind of James Patterson, mass market paperbacks. He was an author on Twitter who writes these books, who had said something horrible about Ferguson, just really inappropriate and racist, basically. Rebecca called him out on it, but she didn't tag him. She said something about it, and somehow he found it and sent it out to his 100,000 Twitter followers. They all came after her, like harassment, rape threats, death threats, the whole nine. And so I got in there with her, like I couldn't stand to watch my friend and co-worker get ripped apart on social media because she was standing up for equality. This just makes no sense to me. So I got in there, and I got my own share of it, and this lasted for a couple of days. It was people telling me that they hope my kids get cancer, that they're gonna find me where I live, and all this stuff, because of something I said about Ferguson, which was mind boggling to me. When it's days like that, when it's like constant, non-stop, and I have to step away from the computer and people are talking about my children, on those days, it gets really difficult. If does give me pause, like, "Why do I even bother when I when I know that there are 400,000 people out there just waiting to jump on somebody for having an opinion that's different from theirs." But for the most part, on days that are not those days, and those are rare days, for the most part, I don't care. The trolling that I get is an irritation at best, and I know that's a privilege. I know that there are people with much bigger social media platforms who have to deal with that kind of stuff just constantly. I get one or two things a day usually. Sometimes it's worse, sometimes it's better. I just ignore it, or block it, or use it. I like poking at trolls, to be honest, like when they come into my mentions and they're saying horrible things to me.I like to say things that annoy them back for a second, and then I block them and move on with my day. It confuses me to be honest because I don't understand what they think is gonna happen, and most of the trolling that I get right now is around my job, so it's like "Amanda Nelson at Book Riot banned me because I said something about how awesome the Confederate flag is, and we should all wrap ourselves in it and go rolling down the street wearing the Confederate flag, and now I'm not allowed to comment. Look, Amanda's a fascist and free speech and blah blah blah." And I'm just like, "Okay, I mean, we're not gonna change anything we're doing. I'm not gonna change anything I'm doing at Book Riot because you complained about it and came on Twitter to call me names." Why are you even wasting your time? At this point I'm just kind of confused by the whole concept of trolling because obviously I'm very open about the kind of trolling that I get because I want other women to see it and to see that it's something that you can you can deal with in your day, so keep talking and be vocal. Don't let it silence you. So I do point it out a lot, and the trolls themselves can see that. I'm not going to stop doing my job in the way that I want to do it just because you don't like it and you came on Twitter to tell me I'm ugly or whatever. I just don't care.

JENN: I just finished Aziz Ansari's *Modern Romance*, and he was touching upon the fact that the way people deal with each other online is that we don't see each other as human, and that's a problem. Tapping into the whole equality and the need for all of us to be equal taps into the power struggle. When someone doesn't see that you are a human being, that you are a mother, that you have cares, that you have a family, that you're friends,and that you're saying something important, they're not looking at you as a human being. They're looking at you as someone in opposition of something that might take something away from them.

AMANDA: Exactly. I think people view it equality as a zero sum game, like white men have x amount of power in the book world, and if I come along with my female brownness, whatever, and get on Book Riot and started using it to change things, that I'm taking something away from them. They think that because I'm successful, they can't be successful, which is just ridiculous. But I can see how that they would think that that's threatening. I've seen blog posts that men have written about me, about how I'm I'm abrasive and I'm using my platform to push the agenda of women, I don't know. The stuff that they say about me is just so confusing.

JENN: You're scaring them.

AMANDA: Yeah. It's not just me. When Tempest Bradford got all of that abuse because she did that article, I don't remember where it was, maybe the *Guardian*, about how she was wasn't gonna read any straight white men for a year and people just came for her. And it was so shocking to me, like what do you care what she reads? But she's a black woman on this giant platform making a statement that just scares people. Because you know if this person with this platform is telling people to read a book by an Asian woman, does that mean that they're not going to read my book? Oh, and I love John Scalzi. John Scalzi is a sci fi author who is just great on Twitter. I love him to death on Twitter. He said something like, "If you decide not to read my book because you're only reading books by women of color for a year, my books will still be there when you're done. And they'll still be there If you never get around to them, like it just doesn't matter. Please go read books by women of color." You know, white men have enough readers, we don't need any more readers. And that's so true, and I appreciated that so much. But, yeah, they do think that it's threatening. And especially now, I think it's interesting that Book Riot is the largest independent editorial book site in North America, and the fact that it's run by a woman of color, I think, bothers a lot of people in a way that they won't admit. But I do think that that's the explanation between a lot of the abuse that I get online.

JENN: It's very disheartening to see, as a woman of color, as someone who agrees with everything you're saying. Wow, what is that about, dudes?

AMANDA: I think it's a feeling of impotence, to be honest, because they know… maybe they don't know… But Rebecca and Jeff, my boss, support me, and obviously they're steering this ship. This editorial direction of the site is 100% their baby, just as much as it is mine. So when people want to complain about me and call me names, and go to my boss and tell my boss about what a horrible feminazi I am, go ahead. Good luck with that. But yeah, it is disheartening to people, but it's also kind of amusing because what are you going to do? Nothing you're going to do is gonna affect my life or my job. So go to town.

JENN: Your opinions are your own, not always Book Riot, as you preface.

AMANDA: I do.

JENN: So thank you so much, Amanda, for your time via Skype tonight to talk about these issues.

AMANDA: Thank you for having me

JENN: So how may people get in contact with you, if they're not trolls?

AMANDA: [laughter] Same way as trolls, I guess. I'm on Twitter: @ImAmandaNelson, and you can always talk to me on Twitter. I love talking to any and all people who aren't there to give me death threats.

JENN: And on Tumblr. You're on Tumblr.

AMANDA: Yes. Same, I think it's ImAmandaNelson.

JENN: How do you balance all that between your social media and Book Riot, Book Riot podcast, the upcoming Book Riot Live, going to conferences, reading books, raising kids?

AMANDA: I don't sleep very much to be honest. And some stuff does die eventually, like my old dearly departed blog, Dead White Guys, died a slow and then very fast death, so that's been sunsetted because I just didn't have time. I don't read a lot of backlist. A lot of books that I want to read I'm never going to get around to. I won't travel a lot when it's not work related. People talk about like have a work life balance, but I think that's total BS. I don't have a work life balance at all, but I'm fine with it. I'm not neglecting my kids. I work from home. It's a great setup. I spend a lot of time with them, but I am in my house a lot.

JENN: You love what you do, and I think that's the biggest thing. If you were still in those customer service jobs, your soul might have died by now.

AMANDA: I was so bad at them, obviously. I am not suited for customer service, sol'm really grateful that I don't do that anymore.

JENN: Thank you again, and I would highly recommend that you follow @ImAmandaNelson and that you follow Book Riot if you aren't already, and that you read more books by diverse people, starting with Ta-Nehisi Coates' book. And the next guest will be author Tananarive Due, who I'm speaking with, and she has a new book coming out called *Ghost Summer,* a story collection, and I would recommend that, Amanda, just saying.

AMANDA: What was it called?

JENN: *Ghost Summer*. It's a collection of stories

AMANDA: Writing it down.

JENN: Tananarive Due, upcoming guest. Thank you again, everyone, for listening to Minoritiesin Publishing. Follow us on Tumblr: Minoritiesinpublishing dot tumblr dot com or on

Twitter at MinoritiesinPublishing. Talk to you all next time. Thank you!

AMANDA: Thanks!