



## Novels in Verse Featuring YA Author and Poet Colby Cedar Smith

### **Transcript:**

00;00;07;04 - 00;00;20;15

Lindsay

**[LINDSAY]** Hello and welcome to Waves of YA, a podcast focused on YA literacy brought to you by the Ocean County Library's Teen Literacy work group. My name is Lindsay. I'm one of the teen librarians at the Brick Branch.

00;00;20;28 - 00;00;25;22

Summer

**[SUMMER]** And my name is Summer. I'm the Teen librarian for the Long Beach Island branch.

00;00;26;13 - 00;01;27;25

Lindsay

**[LINDSAY]** Today's episode also features special guest, author and celebrated poet Colby Cedar Smith. Colby has been a finalist for over 20 poetry prizes, including the Iowa Review Poetry Award, the New Letters Poetry Prize, the Colorado Prize for Poetry and a semifinalist for the 92Y "Discovery"/ Boston Review Poetry Prize. Her debut novel and verse, *Call Me Athena: Girl from Detroit* is a junior library guild Gold Selection, Standard Selection, an American Booksellers Association Kid's Indie Next Pick, a #1 Amazon August New Release in 20th Century Historical Fiction and Teen Poetry, A Cybil's Award Poetry Finalist, a 2021 Good Reads Choice Best Poetry Nominee, and a 2022 Michigan Notable Book. Wow, Colby. Well, thank you so much for joining us today. I'm very excited to talk to you about your book and your writing journey.

00;01;28;06 - 00;01;32;01

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** Thank you for having me. It's a pleasure to be here.

00;01;32;14 - 00;01;38;25

Lindsay

**[LINDSAY]** Tell us a little bit about your writing journey and kind of how you got here.

00;01;40;00 - 00;01;44;27

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *My road has been long and winding is how I would like to begin.*

00;01;47;09 - 00;02;18;16

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *It has not been a straight path. I have always loved writing and I always considered myself a creative person and wrote songs when I was young. And I've always had poetry in my heart. This book came after years and years of writing for adults and getting my poetry published in magazines and anthologies. And I actually have a book called A Year of Salt that I'm hoping to get published soon.*

00;02;19;06 - 00;02;34;27

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *It's an adult book of poetry, a full length manuscript that was a finalist for like 20 book prizes but never taken. And I started to try, actually, I just didn't want to do it anymore, at a certain point.*

00;02;34;27 - 00;03;21;20

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *And I was tired of submitting and tired of working so hard and not quite sure if I wanted to do it anymore. And then I had a friend come to me. Her name is Abigail Rayner and she actually writes picture books and she said, Have you ever thought about writing a novel in verse? And I have children, they are ten and thirteen. And I had seen them bringing home these beautiful books. And after she made that suggestion, I really started to explore what this genre was all about and started to read all of these beautiful examples. And as soon as I got into the writing of this form, I was just absolutely blown away. It felt like it was my form.*

00;03;22;13 - 00;03;55;14

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *And so I actually became a member of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, and I went to my first conference, which was actually in Princeton, New Jersey, and it was called The Autumn Breeze. And I met this woman named Larissa Helena, who was an agent for this wonderful agency called Pippin Properties. And we immediately vibed and she loved the book and I loved her.*

00;03;55;14 - 00;04;19;17

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *And she was like, let's do this, let's make this a book. So we edited that for a really long time and she sent it out and I got several, she sent it out to five editors and I got several revise and resubmit and that's a really amazing thing to get because it's basically like a roadmap to yes, from an editor.*

00;04;20;11 - 00;04;25;23

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *So for me, it felt like a grand rejection. And I cried for six months.*

00;04;26;15 - 00;04;27;10

Lindsay

**[LINDSAY]** Oh, no.

00:04;27;17 - 00:05;24;01

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** And then my lovely agent stopped agenting. Larissa quit her job, and I was stuck without any book, without any agent. I had to tear my whole entire book apart. I had to rewrite it. And so I think this is like year three in the process of writing this book. And then I ended up building up my self-esteem once more, trying to get back to the computer and get my, I like to say my butt in the seat, and I rewrote the book and finally found my glorious dream agent Allison Hellegers, who helped me shape it a little bit more and submitted it. It was submitted on Valentine's Day, and it was accepted several months later by Andrews McMeel. And I'm so happy, but that was five years in the making.

00:05;25;09 - 00:05;29;26

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** So, you know, we have to work hard to get this right.

00:05;30;10 - 00:05;38;18

Lindsay

**[LINDSAY]** Oh, man, I know you're very patient. I know that's a long time to get something going, but I'm glad it happened.

00:05;38;29 - 00:05;54;15

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** Thank you. It's not an unusual story. I feel like every writer who has a book on the shelves has had so many rejections and worked with so many people. And I've learned that writing a book is really a team sport.

00:05;54;15 - 00:05;56;20

Lindsay

**[LINDSAY]** Oh, interesting. Okay, great.

00:05;57;01 - 00:06;16;22

Summer

**[SUMMER]** We talked a little bit about your journey, but I was thinking about your origin, like what made you interested in writing? Was it a passion that you always had or one that you learned from your family? Did your mother and grandmother also enjoy writing? Because I know you talk about them frequently in your book as well. So is it a passion that you shared?

00:06;17;07 - 00:06;42;02

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** That's a really good question. They are not writers. And also, Mary, the grandmother in this book is my paternal grandmother. So my my father's mother. What I would say is that I come from a family of readers and there was no shortage of books in my house. And a lot of my early inspiration came from just, I ate books.

00;06;42;03 - 00;07;14;06

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** I just inhaled them when I was little and kept on inhaling them throughout my entire life. I remember very early going to my grandmother, Mary's house. My grandfather was this is a totally other book, but my grandfather was completely blind. That's Billy in the book. So he was blinded when my father was three. And so all of the books that they had, a lot of the books that they had were half in Braille and half in written English.

00;07;14;28 - 00;07;46;29

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** And they had this anthology, a huge anthology of poetry. And I kind of paged through it, and I started to read a Dream Within A Dream by Edgar Allan Poe. And I got to the line isn't all that we see or seem just a dream within a dream? And I just felt like, yes, yes, it is. And it felt finally like someone was speaking my language.

00;07;47;14 - 00;08;09;00

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** It was really my first poem that I had investigated on my own. I think so much of poetry when we're reading it, is just like it's an intimate dialog between the reader and the writer. And so that was one of my first experiences. The other thing that I can say is that I am constantly very inspired by nature.

00;08;09;00 - 00;08;33;14

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** And I grew up in Minnesota for the most part, in this little house on a lake, an urban lake. There was a canoe and there was a broken down sailboat. And there were a lot of animals. I, as an eight year old, would sneak out of my house. This is not advisable.

00;08;36;04 - 00;09;07;20

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** And I would go down to the lake to explore on my own. After my parents went to bed. This is really not advisable. Don't do this at home. So I went down. I remember there was one night where I went and I laid down by the lake and I looked up at the stars above. There were so many stars that I could almost feel the earth rotating and I could hear things in the night.

00;09;07;20 - 00;09;48;01

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** And I felt like I was talking to the moon. And I felt like I was under this beautiful halo of sky and above this halo of water. And I thought, my goodness, I'm a poet. And so I padded through, I padded up through the this like really wet morning dew grass. And I had muddy feet. And I walked into my house and I walked straight into my parent's room and I grabbed them both in a big hug. And I said, Mom, Dad, I'm a poet.

00;09;48;03 - 00;09;52;24

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** They were like, what is happening? Go back to bed. Why have you been outside?

00;09;53;28 - 00;10;02;21

Summer

**[SUMMER]** That's so cool. I feel realized the best poetry is like a sensory experience. It's something you kind of feel more than you just reading.

00;10;03;28 - 00;10;16;11

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** Yes, I feel like that, too, not only as a reader, but also as a writer. Oftentimes I feel like I have had this moment that the only way to describe it is through poetry.

00;10;16;22 - 00;10;33;06

Lindsay

**[LINDSAY]** It's so interesting to hear you talk and describe that time. You can just tell from how you speak that you're like a natural storyteller. Definitely a poet. I it's really nice to listen to.

00;10;33;11 - 00;10;34;18

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** I'll take that as a compliment.

00;10;35;20 - 00;10;39;23

Lindsay

**[LINDSAY]** But people don't talk like that every day. So it's I really enjoyed that.

00;10;40;05 - 00;10;52;12

Summer

**[SUMMER]** I remember that moment so acutely. I feel like I very rarely remember my childhood that well. I must have been a really core memory, to have struck you so much.

00;10;54;02 - 00;11;11;09

Lindsay

**[LINDSAY]** Okay, so let's really talk about *Call Me Athena*. Can you give us a brief synopsis, what it's about? Anything interesting you can tell us about the story itself or just the book in general? Anything you can tell us?

00;11;11;16 - 00;11;46;06

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** Yeah. So I'll start with the synopsis and then maybe talk about inspiration and then a few things. This is a very personal story for me. It's based on my grandmother, Mary Skandalaris, who was the daughter of Greek and French immigrants in Detroit, Michigan, in the 1930s. In the book, Mary struggles to find her path as a modern American woman, and she clashes with her parents over issues of arranged marriage and yearning to grow beyond her own culture.

00;11;46;16 - 00;12;17;00

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *The book is told from her perspective, but it also has flashbacks to her parents life in Greece and France at the end of World War One, when they were also 16. It's like a snapshot of all of their lives in the same age. And even though it's written by three profoundly different narrators, it's really about the courage that it takes to honor tradition and heritage, all the while forging a new future in a new land.*

00;12;17;19 - 00;12;54;15

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *And even though it's a historical novel, I believe that the themes that are present in the book a search for identity and freedom and independence, equality, immigration, feminism and hope are all themes that I hope will really resonate with readers today and that I really find so much inspiration in stories about the past and the present and, and finding these sort of patterns of resilience and the resonance between different time periods.*

00;12;55;15 - 00;13;21;06

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *So I wrote this book. I wrote Call Me Athena after my grandmother had passed, after she had struggled with Alzheimer's for years and years. And I really wrote this book to record her stories. And then I've written a little bit about this in the author's note in the back. But she was a natural storyteller. She was incredible and funny and feisty and sometimes mean.*

00;13;21;06 - 00;13;23;05

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *But you know...*

00;13;23;13 - 00;13;25;28

Summer

**[SUMMER]** *It's a Grandma thing, yeah.*

00;13;26;17 - 00;13;58;14

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *I grew up listening at her feet. I grew up listening to all the stories and about Detroit and Greektown and the Ford factory and the poverty her family faced. They really were the building blocks for who I became and who I was as a person, who my family was, and how we made our way in America. I always say this isn't every immigration story, but it's one family's immigration story.*

00;13;59;11 - 00;14;21;26

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *But because she had lost all of these stories, because she was at the end not able to tell any story, not even able to remember who she was or who I was or she went back to almost being an infant. It really felt like she had created this beautiful tapestry and then this tapestry was unraveling and I was left holding one stream, one thread.*

00;14;23;05 - 00;14;52;13

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *And so as I started to really write about her family and my family, I felt like I was weaving the tapestry back together again. And it gave me. I get emotional talking about it gave me a little bit more time with her. There's a quote that I like to say. It's by the poet Patricia Smith. And she said, Poetry doesn't cure grief, but it understands it.*

00;14;53;22 - 00;15;01;00

Lindsay

**[LINDSAY]** *I like that. So was it difficult for you to kind of juggle the multiple timelines?*

00;15;01;01 - 00;15;30;17

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *Yeah. In fact, the first version that I talked about, that was first submitted to editors at the big five publishing houses, that it was three different sections. So all of Gio's section were at the beginning, then it was Jeanne's section and then it was Mary's section. The way that it came out was very linear and very clear and not as engaging, I would say.*

00;15;31;00 - 00;15;31;20

Lindsay

**[LINDSAY]** *Okay.*

00;15;31;20 - 00;16;03;26

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *And one of the suggestions so there were several suggestions from different editors about pushing it a little bit more towards The YA voice, because it is a crossover book. It's very easily read by adults and by teens and even kids who are 12, I think. One of the editors had the suggestion that it should be really Mary, who was the main character, and then it should be the stories woven into her character line.*

00;16;03;26 - 00;16;33;08

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *And that made sense to me. But it was super hard and what I ended up doing, granny writers out there, is because it's such a tome, it's like it's a 575 page book, which I like to think it reads very, very quickly because there's so much white space. But I actually physically clipped each of the different sections that I was working on and then color coded them for the different characters.*

00;16;33;21 - 00;17;05;23

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *And I spent probably three months after almost all of it was written, and I really was trying to find the moments where the chapters would be the most exciting, moments to like shift the storyline and where the plot was really like rotating around itself. And then what I tried to do was find those places within each of those stories where, like, they're all building, they're all starting there.*

00;17;06;02 - 00;17;32;04

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** Like they're all on a hero's journey, in a way. And so I wanted all of those moments to match where it's like the building, there's adventure. They're going out into a new world and creating a new reality, and then they lose everything all at the same time. And then and there's a moment, I mean, like even writing the book, like three quarters of the way through the book, you're like, Oh my God, this is so hard!

00;17;32;10 - 00;17;33;29

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** But you're supposed to feel that way.

00;17;34;00 - 00;17;36;19

Summer

**[SUMMER]** Yes.

00;17;36;19 - 00;18;02;04

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** I cried so much while writing this book, I can't even tell you. So it was it was really a methodical process. Stephen King likes to describe writers as plotters and pantzers. So like people who have like timelines and like they've plotted it all out and people who write by the seat of their pants, I would say I wrote this book by the seat of my pants 100%, but I edited as a plotter.

00;18;02;10 - 00;18;21;25

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** Like there were Excel files open there where there was color coding. It was all over the ground. It was very seriously like braiding different lines together and thinking about the names and how they informed each other.

00;18;22;15 - 00;18;44;14

Summer

**[SUMMER]** What exactly do you enjoy the most about writing books and verse and poetry? Because, you know, they're similar, but they are they can also be separate entities. And I also wanted to tie in what you said earlier about creating a novel in verse for the teen market, which was, which kind of came about accidentally, and how you think that has affected how you view the book?

00;18;44;22 - 00;18;57;18

Summer

**[SUMMER]** Because I, for one, really enjoy books in verse as a young adult aspect, because I think it is a way to get young people into reading poetry in a way that doesn't seem daunting or inaccessible.

00;18;58;06 - 00;18;58;19

Colby Cedar Smith



**[COLBY]** Mm hmm.

00;18;58;28 - 00;19;01;07

Summer

**[SUMMER]** So I wanted to tie that into the question as well.

00;19;01;22 - 00;19;37;29

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** It's difficult for me to talk about why I love writing poetry so much, because I feel so deeply about it. So I don't write poetry because I like it. I write poetry because I need it. For me, poetry is all connection. Connection to nature, to time, to humanity, to my family, and to myself. If I open up to that connection, then the poems flow.

00;19;38;05 - 00;20;10;27

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** It feels to me like I'm a vessel or a lightning bolt or a channel or a thread or a filament. And the more I can get out of my own way, out of my own mind, the better I can write my poems. There's a comfort to that. For me, it's a cathartic, beautiful relationship that I have with my poetry.

00;20;11;26 - 00;20;18;02

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** Poetry is my best friend. It's always there. So that's how I feel about poetry.

00;20;19;28 - 00;20;20;24

Summer

**[SUMMER]** It's really beautiful.

00;20;21;00 - 00;20;21;20

Lindsay

**[LINDSAY]** It is.

00;20;22;01 - 00;20;49;27

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** Thank you. The way that I feel about writing novels in verse is that I have always wanted to write a novel, but I didn't know how. And I didn't feel like my voice fit right in that way. Because I think in poetry and my spirit expresses itself in poetry. So I hope to one day write a novel in prose.

00;20;49;27 - 00;21;09;15

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** You're so right, Summer, a novel in verse is not poetry. And it's not a novel. And it's somewhere in between. It exists somewhere in between that. So I knew how to write poetry. I had been studying poetry. I have a degree in poetry and I had been writing poetry for 20 years, but I didn't know how to write a novel.

00;21;09;25 - 00;21;38;25

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *And so I had to teach myself that skill. And I, I basically gave myself an MFA in fiction and I read 20 books on how to craft a story arc and plot points. And even though I had been reading my entire life and I had been immersed in stories that had all these plot points, and I could intellectually understand that, that's not actually the reason why I read.*

00;21;39;06 - 00;22;15;02

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *I read for this beautiful moment, this beautiful sigh, where you close a book and you can't breathe because it's so beautiful. That, I feel like I knew intuitively and the rest I didn't know how to do. On to writing for the teen market. One of my inspirations was I heard Jason Reynolds once say that this was a great form for dyslexic readers or teen readers who were more hesitant to pick up a novel because they didn't think they could make it all the way through.*

00;22;15;02 - 00;22;45;08

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *And I have a nephew who is dyslexic, and I started to think about, well, if my role, well, writing this book, was to capture my grandmother's stories for our whole family, to read that it should probably be in a form that made sense to him. He was one of my inspirations. So many of the beautiful teen stories that are in the market today, I mean, this is like a thriving moment for Y.A. literature, right?*

00;22;46;01 - 00;23;15;08

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *It's really about how to isolate and distill, like how how we want to be in the world, how we grow into who we want to be in the world. And so as I was revising this book, it was really it really became about Mary's journey and those questions she was asking herself. And what I really feel so strongly is there's this chasm between parents and teens often.*

00;23;15;26 - 00;23;55;14

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *And as a parent, I'm coming into this witnessing more teen life. But there's often this moment of like, oh, my God, you don't understand anything about my generation. And I have experienced that as a teen. But I'm beginning to understand that as a parent, there was there was a goal for me, this beautiful, copacetic relationship that can happen if a teen can open themselves up to learning about and through their parents stories.*

00;23;55;14 - 00;24;07;21

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *And there's also a real magic when parents can open themselves up to see their teenager becoming and growing.*

00;24;08;21 - 00;24;10;03

Summer

**[SUMMER]** *It's a two way street.*

00;24;10;03 - 00;24;37;24

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *It's a two way street. And unless that empathy and listening can happen, then there's going to be a severing of the relationship. And so I feel like one of the gifts that my parents gave me, one of the gifts that my grandmother gave me, is that there was a lot of open storytelling on their part, and there was a lot of listening and also sharing on my part.*

00;24;38;25 - 00;24;48;28

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *So I tried to represent that in the book, although it's like, really, oh, it's so hard sometimes, you know, to get your true self out there.*

00;24;49;15 - 00;25;13;03

Lindsay

**[LINDSAY]** *I want to ask you about the cover, the art, who designed it. So if you could just give a little plug to the artist and kind of just briefly tell us how it came to be a cover. Yeah, that's I'm a reader. I am not a writer, but I do consider myself an artist. So I'm always drawn to cover art.*

00;25;13;04 - 00;25;15;23

Lindsay

**[LINDSAY]** *So I want to hear a little bit about it, if you will.*

00;25;16;23 - 00;25;28;18

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *Yes, I love talking about the cover. So it is a piece of art by a Turkish artist named Hulya Ozdemir, I think I'm saying her name right, but, I'm not sure.*

00;25;28;18 - 00;25;29;02

Lindsay

**[LINDSAY]** *Okay.*

00;25;29;07 - 00;25;48;23

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *I have loved her art for years and years and years. And you can actually find her on Instagram @huliaozdemir And it's Hulia with an H. As a writer, you so very often do not get to choose your cover at all. Really? They come to you. This is. This is what I've heard since this is my first book.*

00;25;48;23 - 00;26;32;25

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *I didn't have that experience, but they come to you with a couple of different options and then you have a little say. Initially, Andrews McMeel was super kind and asked me if I had any ideas and I said, well, I really love, you know, a couple of different artists. And Hulya was one of them. And so we we*

went through all of her portraits and this one was so clearly where I wanted to be, because actually this feels a little bit like olive branches and the fruit, and one of the characters, Jeanne, her nickname is Petit Oiseau, and which means, Little Bird.

00;26;33;05 - 00;26;57;03

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** And there's this Blue Bird, my daughter, her nickname is Bluebird. And so I was like, oh my gosh, it even has a bluebird. And it had, like, this antiquated feel to the dress. And I was really, really excited about this one. And my agent, Allison Hellegers, did just so much hard work trying to track down Hulya and like get a response from her.

00;26;57;22 - 00;27;23;19

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** She went through multiple channels to try to find her. So finally there was contact made and Hulia actually said, there's not a high rez file for that. So she actually recreated the painting specifically for the book, which is amazing. And then, it was taken by my editor, Patty Rice at Andrews McMeel and by the book jacket designer there, Holly Swayne.

00;27;23;29 - 00;27;34;13

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** And then Holly did amazing stuff. She added this beautiful yellow font, which I constantly like when I see it on a shelf, like like.

00;27;34;15 - 00;27;35;10

Lindsay

**[LINDSAY]** It just stands out.

00;27;35;20 - 00;27;52;11

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** And it's amazing and beautiful book. And then we were lucky enough, oh, gosh, to get this beautiful quote from Ruta Sepetys, who's my favorite writer ever, so I'm just so pleased with the cover.

00;27;52;16 - 00;28;12;28

Lindsay

**[LINDSAY]** It is like the whole thing from cover to the words, like it's just stunning and I love it. And I have two copies in my collection at the library. We have a hardback copy, which is beautiful, has the bookmark, and then we have paperback. So we got it all.

00;28;12;28 - 00;28;49;27

Summer

**[SUMMER]** I feel like Andrews McMeel is like, many of the covers I have seen for their poetry books are really beautiful and unique, and obviously, there are other poetry publishers, but I do feel like a lot of the very popular poetry books I've seen lately are from them, which I think is responsible for the resurgence of poetry becoming popular among young people again. And it has a lot to do with the way it's perceived

*and the way we view it. We like to say, you can't judge a book by its cover, but sometimes you judge a book by its cover.*

00;28;50;08 - 00;28;51;27

Lindsay

**[LINDSAY]** *Yeah, I definitely did.*

00;28;52;05 - 00;29;13;08

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *I'm so glad that you mentioned that because I as I went into really thinking about who I wanted to work with, that was one of my considerations. I knew they were going to make a beautiful book and they are just such a leader in bringing poetry and making it more accessible for a teen audience and basically any audience.*

00;29;13;20 - 00;29;26;12

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *And I think that that is yeah, it was one of my one of my goals to create something that wouldn't scare people with the poetry, but would be able to get into the depth of it.*

00;29;27;01 - 00;29;41;10

Summer

**[SUMMER]** *Yeah, because we don't want to we don't want to gatekeep poetry. We don't want to make it seem like it's all highbrow literature that only the few can understand. It's accessible for everyone and it's just for enjoyment at the end of the day.*

00;29;41;19 - 00;30;11;04

Lindsay

**[LINDSAY]** *And it's funny, I think like growing up, especially as a teen, that was why I kind of stayed away from poetry because I didn't think that I was going to be able to understand what I was reading. But now as I get older, it is accessible to everyone. And it's really interesting to see the difference for me personally and like how much I really do enjoy it and I wish it was something I tried to read more when I was younger.*

00;30;11;25 - 00;30;37;13

Summer

**[SUMMER]** *I was really lucky. One of my teachers in grade school did like a poetry unit in our language arts class. Every week we had to find a poem to read out loud, so it made us actively look for poems that were readable to like a fifth grader. And that kind of just kind of like the gateway to just looking at poetry as not like something scary.*

00;30;37;23 - 00;30;38;12

Lindsay

**[LINDSAY]** *Yeah.*

00:30:38:12 - 00:31:02:17

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *I love that so much because I really believe poetry is meant to be read out loud. And when you read it through the words and the breath through your body, you understand the rhythm and the power and dynamic of language. And so having a teacher ask you to read poems out loud, I'm sure it's easier to fall in love with poetry out loud.*

00:31:03:07 - 00:31:30:00

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *I love that you brought up the gatekeepers for we don't want gatekeepers for poetry. And I think that what's so exciting about poetry right now is that there's so many ways to share story and voice and so many publications and so many programs in colleges in America. And it's really becoming more accessible for a large population. That's fabulous.*

00:31:30:00 - 00:31:42:13

Summer

**[SUMMER]** *Yeah, unfortunately, there are still people who try to keep it to themselves. I've heard one or two people say things like, oh, I don't like poetry today. And I'm like, well, what does that mean, exactly? Today is a very general term.*

00:31:43:10 - 00:32:24:03

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *There's such a diversity of voices right now, and we want more and more of that. I think that this mixed genre of novels and verse is entrance in almost like a gateway drug, which is like you begin to find it interesting and then you want more. You start loving the poetry that's about feelings and has simple colloquial language, and you begin to understand the devices that are being used and this pared down language, this distilling of imagery.*

00:32:24:27 - 00:32:35:18

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *And you begin to like have the scaffolding where you can start to begin to read Auden or Sylvia Plath.*

00:32:36:00 - 00:32:44:00

Summer

**[SUMMER]** *When you're a little bit of an emo teen, emo middle schooler, so that was my jam in middle school, Sylvia Plath.*

00:32:44:10 - 00:32:45:01

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *And I love Sylvia Plath.*

00:32:45:01 - 00:32:47:21

Summer

**[SUMMER]** *And with my black nails.*

00;32;47;21 - 00;33;09;27

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *Yes. But I think that there are poems that we read as teens and we don't get them. But if you love poetry and you have a trust in poetry, you will be like I have been, which is, I read Sylvia Plath as a 16 year old, didn't quite get it. I read Sylvia Plath as a college student, didn't quite get it.*

00;33;10;01 - 00;33;23;26

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *Read Sylvia Plath. And then all of a sudden, as a 43 year old woman, I understand a little bit more of the layering in there, and I still don't quite get it. So I'm going to read it when I'm 50 and 60.*

00;33;25;04 - 00;33;50;15

Summer

**[SUMMER]** *What I like about poetry, too, is that I feel like sometimes, you don't have to get it, right. You're just like, I definitely had times I read a poem and I didn't fully grasp what was going on, but something about just the way it sounded in my head was appealing. And, oh, that's just enough sometimes, you're like, well, I just like the way this sounds and it appeals to something in me.*

00;33;51;08 - 00;33;52;19

Summer

**[SUMMER]** *You really don't know what it is.*

00;33;52;27 - 00;34;15;09

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *I love the way that you said that, and I completely agree. I teach a whole bunch of different audiences. I'm actually going in all of May into a school and teaching all the fourth graders for the month of May every day. And that is one of the things that I'm going to stress, Summer, is that sometimes it's just about a moment that captures you.*

00;34;15;11 - 00;34;37;23

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *I follow Margarita Engle, who is a beautiful poet, and she also writes novels and verse on Twitter, and she just posted something that says that as a teacher, one of the interesting ways that we can read a poem with our students and ask our students to enter the poem is to ask them how the poem makes them feel, not what the poem means.*

00;34;38;16 - 00;34;43;23

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *And I think that gets us closer to those experiences that you were just talking about, Summer.*

00;34;44;01 - 00;35;19;05

Summer

**[SUMMER]** Talking about Sylvia Plath, because I feel like she's probably one of them that I remember more vividly, is that I feel like when I first read Lady Lazarus, I hadn't read The Bell Jar, so I had no idea that it was about her stint in a mental hospital. But like the line at the end where she says, out of my, I rise with my red hair, like I was like that, like it just draws like an image in your mind that feels powerful and it appeals to you. Even if you don't have the context, it can. Also, poetry can give you words for the words that you don't know how to say.

00:35;19;10 - 00:35;52;28

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** There's a Shakespearean line where he says, Poets give to airy nothing, a local habitation and a name. I love it because when I was studying literature in college, there was the idea of the like Russian formalism and the idea is that writing de-habitualizes, and so it makes things that you've seen all the time over and over again, like a pair of glasses or a candlestick or a cup into something different.

00:35;52;28 - 00:36;02;12

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** And it also has that opposite way where even expressing it makes you understand it differently. It's pretty magical. Honestly.

00:36;02;26 - 00:36;12;24

Summer

**[SUMMER]** I did want to ask about if, Colby, if you have any novels in verse that are your favorites or that you wish you wrote, you're, like, the ones that have inspired you.

00:36;13;05 - 00:36;58;12

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** Yes, the ones that really inspired me to write the book that I wrote were Inside Out and Back Again by Thanhha Lai, and Out of the Dust by Karen Hesse. Karen Hesse gave the sort of texture of the Depression era which helped me a lot. And Tannhha Lai tells me, her language is just incredible. I think as a poet when I had created my own style as an adult poet, but when I read Tannhha Lai, I was like, oh my gosh, you are taking the beauty of adult poetry and you're simplifying it into a way that a child can understand.

00:36;58;24 - 00:37;27;15

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** And that was a magical understanding for me that the new books that I want people to like read, one of them is Me (moth) by Amber McBride. Our books came out on the very same day, and so it started a dialog between us. But like Me (moth) is, it's bone crushing. It's so gorgeous. And somehow you are changed after you read it.

00:37;27;15 - 00:37;55;04

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** So definitely, definitely read that one. And then there's a writer named Rebecca Caprara, she's written some middle grade books. One of them is Worst-case Colin, which is a really great middle grade



novel in verse. But she has just written a YA novel in verse, and it isn't out yet and it's called *Spin*. And I was lucky enough to get a chance to read it and give her a blurb for it.

00:37:55;14 - 00:38:08;11

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** But it's the retelling of the Greek mythology of Arachne. And I, I was just like, I could not stop reading. I could not stop placing the pages. I was just like, Why didn't I write that?

00:38:09;04 - 00:38:22;11

Summer

**[SUMMER]** That's, that's so good, you know? That's exactly the kind of thing I would like. And I wanted to actually ask you, have you ever read, I want to make sure I get the author's name right so I'm pulling it up, it's *Bull* by David Elliott.

00:38:22;11 - 00:38:23;29

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** Yes, I love that one!

00:38:24;00 - 00:38:40;26

Summer

**[SUMMER]** Yeah, when he says like, call me Asterion. Oh, I love the minotaur. Yeah, because I, I'm a huge like, I love fantasy and I love horror and I love paranormal stuff and I love, like, a misunderstood monster.

00:38:41;08 - 00:38:41;23

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** Yeah.

00:38:41;23 - 00:38:52;26

Summer

**[SUMMER]** And I always thought the minotaurs misunderstood. I was like, they are mean to the minotaur for no reason. And this book, I was just like, yes, I loved this book. I think you wrote another one about Joan of Arc that I haven't read yet.

00:38:52;26 - 00:39:09;24

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** I was just going to bring that one up because if I if you've read my book, you know that I really love Joan of Arc. And I actually after I was done with this book, I was like, Oh, and now I will write a novel in verse about Joan of Arc. And it's going to be like really about, like, her internal, like, witchy power.

00:39:09;26 - 00:39:12;09

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** Yeah. And then he came out with *Voices* and I was like...

00:39:12;23 - 00:39:14;21

Summer

**[SUMMER]** Well, I'm sure there's room for more than one.

00:39;15;12 - 00:39;17;25

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** I'm hoping, because mine would be different than his.

00:39;17;25 - 00:39;20;26

Summer

**[SUMMER]** But, you can get something different out of everything.

00:39;21;01 - 00:39;21;25

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** Yeah, it's coming.

00:39;21;28 - 00:39;27;00

Summer

**[SUMMER]** I would, I would read it. If you wrote it, I would read it. Send me the Arc.

00:39;27;00 - 00:39;28;09

Lindsay

**[LINDSAY]** You have two readers here.

00:39;28;24 - 00:39;33;28

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** Great. I've got to finish the one that I'm writing right now.

00:39;34;05 - 00:39;36;06

Summer

**[SUMMER]** Are you allowed to tell us about it or is that a secret?

00:39;36;15 - 00:39;50;27

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** I am not going to tell too much about it, but it is a historical novel in verse and it takes place in the lusty and lush background of Venice in the 1600's.

00:39;50;27 - 00:39;53;12

Summer

**[SUMMER]** And this is going to be another YA or an adult one.

00:39;53;21 - 00:40;22;15

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** It's YA it's really about experiences and being a woman and opening yourself up to that pleasure and experience. You know, body positivity has taken off and it's such an amazing movement

*right now, but also like pleasure positivity or sensuality or like, so there is more to say about that project, but I'm keeping it a little bit close to the chest right now.*

00;40;22;25 - 00;40;25;11

Summer

**[SUMMER]** *Thank you for telling us what you could. That's so exciting.*

00;40;25;11 - 00;40;27;09

Lindsay

**[LINDSAY]** *Yeah, I'm excited for it. So hurry up!*

00;40;27;09 - 00;40;29;10

Summer

**[SUMMER]** *And Venice, what a great place.*

00;40;30;04 - 00;40;32;23

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *I know, I'm trying, I'm trying..*

00;40;33;28 - 00;40;40;11

Lindsay

**[LINDSAY]** *We're getting close to wrapping up. So where can we reach you? Where can our listeners find you on social media? Anywhere.*

00;40;40;18 - 00;40;41;13

Summer

**[SUMMER]** *The interwebs?*

00;40;41;18 - 00;41;13;04

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *Yes. Yes, I am. I am present on the interwebs. And you can follow me on Twitter at @ColbyCedar or Instagram at Colby\_Cedar\_Smith. I would love to hear from you. I love talking to librarians. I love going into classrooms. I love hearing from people who like the book so feel free to reach out. And ,yeah, authors like to talk about their books.*

00;41;13;20 - 00;41;23;22

Lindsay

**[LINDSAY]** *So wonderful talking to you. Would you be willing to share a poem or something from Call Me Athena. Anything that you would like of your writing?*

00;41;23;22 - 00;41;59;28

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *What I really want to do is share three short poems that really give the flavor and feeling of the scene. And I'm going to write when, so Mary has been told by her parents that she has an arranged*

*marriage to an older man in their Greek community named Dimitris. And this is their first meeting. You can see the expectation, the cultural expectation, and you can also see how she feels about it.*

00;41;59;28 - 00;42;32;10

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *Mother slices the cake. Father pours sour cherry liqueur into small glasses. Mary made this herself, he says, and pats my arm with pride. Dimitris takes a sip and smiles politely. They leave us alone in the parlor. Golden icons of Mary and Baby Jesus Look down at me From high on the shelves Demetrius scoots next to me. The side of his body is touching mine.*

00;42;33;00 - 00;43;04;10

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *You are a beautiful young girl, he says, and he takes a lock of my hair and twists it around his finger. His breath smells like death and onions. Who is this wicked old man? He wants a child. I want to grow the claws and wings of a gorgon. Feed his eyes to the hungry creatures that live in the depths of the swamp. Turn him into stone.*

00;43;06;00 - 00;43;43;10

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *When I was twelve, my mother and I embroidered a soft white gown, two sheets, and two pillowcases. Every single piece decorated with pink and yellow flowers. We folded them carefully into my cedar dowry chest. I imagined with each stitch how excited I would be to wear a nightgown in front of a man for the first time. Now, I know I have sewn the bed that I must lie in. These linens will be my prison.*

00;43;44;05 - 00;43;48;25

Lindsay

**[LINDSAY]** *Wow. Thank you so much for sharing that, really powerful.*

00;43;48;25 - 00;43;51;21

Colby Cedar Smith

**[COLBY]** *Thank you for inviting me here and listening.*

00;43;52;23 - 00;44;12;22

Lindsay

**[LINDSAY]** *Thanks for joining us today. Be sure to check out the Ocean County Library's website for more podcasts and events on our website. Calendar of Events Page. All titles mentioned in today's episode can be found through the Ocean County Library, free with your library card. Until next time, happy reading.*