



LIGHT FROM UNCOMMON STARS BY RYKA AOKI

OPEN BOOKS – OPEN MINDS COMMON BOOK, 2024-2025

TEACHING GUIDE

Book Blurb

Light From Uncommon Stars is an elegant young adult novel that defies categorization as well as gravity—a light-as-air ride through bildungsroman, science fiction, and fantasy. This is not to say the novel is weightless; it grapples with serious themes, addressing both worldly and otherworldly terrors with a bracing matter-of-factness. Still, it never allows itself to be completely bogged down by them. This appears to be the signature style of Ryka Aoki, a trans Asian American poet, author, teacher, and composer. Her new novel is an intimate portrayal of a young woman coming into her own as she faces threats, both to her identity and her person, whose relentlessness and sheer cruelty make an actual demon’s incursions into her life look like a trifling matter.

RYKA AOKI is a poet, composer, teacher, and novelist. Her latest novel *Light From Uncommon Stars* (TOR Books, 2021) was an Alex, SCKA, and Otherwise Award winner, and was also a finalist for the Hugo, Locus, and Ignyte Awards. Ryka is a two-time Lambda Literary Award finalist for her collection *Seasonal Velocities* and *Why Dust Shall Never Settle Upon This Soul*, and her first novel, *He Mele a Hilo* was called one of the “10 Best Books Set in Hawaii” by *Bookriot*. She has been recognized by the California State Senate for “extraordinary commitment to the visibility and well-being of Transgender people,” and her work has appeared or been recognized in publications including *Vogue*, *Elle*, *Bustle*, *Autostraddle*, *PopSugar*, and *Buzzfeed*, as well as the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center. She was also honored to work with the American Association of Hiroshima Nagasaki A-Bomb Survivors, where two of her compositions were adopted as the organization’s “songs of peace.” Ryka also appears in the recent documentaries “*Diagnosing Difference*” and “*Riot Acts*,” as well as writing for and acting in the award-winning film “*Transfinite*.”

She is a two-time Lambda Award finalist, and winner of the Eli Coppola Chapbook Contest, the Corson-Bishop Poetry Prize, and a University Award from the Academy of American Poets. She is also a Professor of English at Santa Monica College, a pianist, and is starting to learn to play the violin.

www.rykakaryka.com

Awards and Accolades for LIGHT FROM UNCOMMON STARS

Hugo Award Finalist

A National Bestseller

Indie Next Pick

New York Public Library Top 10 Book of 2021

A Kirkus Best Book of 2021

A Barnes & Noble Best Science Fiction Book of 2021

2022 Alex Award Winner

2022 Stonewall Book Award Winner

Finalist for Locus Award, Ignite Award, and Dragon Award. 2022 Alex Award Winner

Press Coverage

Ancillary Review of Books: The SFF Librarian Reviews Light From Uncommon Stars by Ryka Aoki

Lesbrary: Danika reviews Light From UnCommon Stars by Ryka Aoki

Locus Magazine: Caren Gussoff Sumption Reviews Light From Uncommon Stars by Ryka Aoki by Caren Gussoff Sumption

The New York Times: Beasts and Baseball: New Science Fiction and Fantasy

SFRA Review Volume 54, Number 1: Review of Light From Uncommon Stars by Yen Ooi

The Rumpus: Defying Gravity: Ryka Aoki's Light From Uncommon Stars by Krithika Sukumar

Other Works by Ryka Aoki

HE MELE A HILO (Signature Press, 2014)

SEASONAL VELOCITIES (Trans-Genre Press, 2013)

WHY DUST SHALL NEVER SETTLE UPON THIS SOUL (Biyutti Press, 2015)

THE GREAT SPACE ADVENTURE (Flamingo Rampant Press, 2019)

THEMES AND RECURRING IMAGERY, TOPICS FOR RESEARCH

Child Abuse

Racism

Transphobia

Queer Community

Identity

Self-Acceptance

Rape

Music

East Asian Communities

Food

Los Angeles

Redemption and Damnation

Aliens

Artificial Intelligence

Karma

Love

The Banality of Evil

Talent

Immigration

Parenting

Erasure of women from history

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is the importance of Miss Satomi being known as “the Queen of Hell?” Do you think there is a deeper meaning than the one we are given in the novel (about her reputation with students who commit suicide)?
- Throughout the novel, music has influenced the characters in many ways. Reflect on your own life and how music has influenced you. Can you relate to the characters more through the music? Do you think music has the capability to break down metaphorical walls and bring people together? Is that the effect of music? More broadly, is that the effect of art? If not, what are the effects of art?
- Do you think the challenges that Katrina has faced being queer helped contribute to her strength character as compared to Miss Satomi’s previous students? Is Katrina more resilient? Or, in a broader sense, how does the concept of trans and its possibilities—a way of existing and thinking out of the box; nonconforming; or transcendent—offer new possibilities of being in the world? Consider the playfulness of Lan’s family name—the Trans.

- In what ways does the plotline of the AI character Shirley complicate the novel's exploration of identity?
- How do the contrasting experiences of identity and self-acceptance for Katrina, Shirley, and Lucy reveal the varying impacts of societal and familial pressures on individuals, and how do their respective transformations challenge traditional norms?
- In what ways does the novel's portrayal of refugees and outsiders, particularly through Lan Tran's family, parallel real-world challenges faced by immigrant communities today? How can these parallels enhance our understanding of empathy and resilience in the face of displacement?
- Analyze the influence of parental figures on the characters of Katrina, Lan Tran's children, and Lucy Matía in shaping their identities and life choices. What lessons can be drawn from these relationships about nurturing self-worth and independence in challenging family dynamics?
- How does the theme of inevitability of change and transition, as experienced by characters like Katrina and the evolving Los Angeles setting, illustrate the broader message about adaptability and growth in the novel? How can embracing change lead to a more inclusive and dynamic society?
- Describe how Katrina Nguyen's refusal to use alien technology to modify her body in *Light from Uncommon Stars* highlights the intricate relationship between her gender identity and her music. How does this decision shape her journey towards self-acceptance and mastery of the violin?
- Analyzing Shizuka Satomi's character arc, discuss how her relationship with Katrina challenges her initial motivations and worldview. What factors contribute to Shizuka's transformation and ultimate redemption, and how do these changes reflect upon her concept of music and mentorship?
- Considering Lan Tran's dual role as both a mother and a space captain, evaluate the complexities she faces while attempting to maintain her family's stability. How does her romantic relationship with Shizuka help her reconcile these roles, and what does this reveal about her struggles and growth throughout the novel?
- Explore Lucy Matía's journey of reclaiming her family legacy within the patriarchal confines of the violin-making world. How do the historical injustices she uncovers about talented women influence her actions, and how does Lucy's self-discovery mirror the broader themes of legacy and gender equality in *Light from Uncommon Stars*?
- Reflect on the transformative power of music as portrayed in *Light from Uncommon Stars*. How do the characters' individual experiences with music—whether as a form of self-expression, means of survival, or pathway to redemption—interweave to present a cohesive narrative about the impact of art on personal and communal healing?

- How does Katrina's journey with the violin in *Light from Uncommon Stars* illustrate the transformative power of music, and in what ways can this transformation be compared to Shizuka's struggle to regain her lost power through music? How might Shizuka's experience inform our understanding of the sacrifices made by aspiring musicians who “sell their souls” for fame?
- In *Light from Uncommon Stars*, food represents cultural transformation and emotional significance. Analyzing the evolution of restaurant menus in the book, how does the blending of different cuisines parallel the personal growth and transition of characters like Lan and Aunt Floresta? What does this imply about the importance of emotional and cultural appreciation in creative endeavors?
- What does the stargate, constructed by the Tran family represent? How does this symbol evolve from representing hopelessness and trauma to becoming a beacon of hope for Shizuka and Lan? What does their eventual escape through the stargate suggest about the potential for transformation and healing through seemingly futile endeavors?
- What do the koi fish in Shizuka's pond represent? How are Shizuka's decisions regarding Katrina's future informed by her observation of the fish? By watching, Shizuka recognizes the destructive influence of parents. How is this revelation reflected in the novel's themes of growth and change?
- *NetherTale* is a fictional game with a unique perspective on non-violence and empathy. How does *The NetherTale* directly contrast and/or relate to Shizuka's relationship and experiences with Hell and demons? How does Shizuka's changing viewpoint towards the game reflect her relationship with Katrina and her own personal growth? Can the impact of *NetherTale* on Shizuka's final performance be seen as a metaphor for the transformative power of kindness and mutual respect in overcoming personal and societal conflicts?

ASSIGNMENTS:

- In Chapter 3 we learn that Lan Tran and her family traveled through space to find a safe home from her old world. In Chapter 7 we learn that they were Citizens of the Galactic Empire. In 1250 words, I want you to create the galaxy that the Trans were fleeing from. What was their homeworld like? How bad was the war? Where were there others like the Trans trying to escape? Use the information from the book to shape your creative piece.
- How does this book and its themes around art and identity have to do with aestheticism and the ideas about art we discussed in class. Are they connected? Write a brief response and include any quotations or further insight found.
- Place yourself in the shoes of one of the main characters (Katrina, Shizuka, Lan, or Lucy). Write a paragraph or two about how you would handle the situations that have occurred in the first 100 pages of the book. How would you react to the lives of those around you given such a unique origin?

- One of the major themes in the story is the idea of sacrificing something in hopes of a better future. For Katrina, she had run away from home because of the abuse she suffered and makes difficult decisions while on her own, and Shizuka Satomi makes a deal with the devil in exchange for the souls of violin prodigies. In what ways are the sacrifices that Katrina makes similar or different from the deal that Shizuka Satomi had made with the devil?
- In the story, Katrina does not fit the role that many people like her parents expected of her, which leads to her running away and finding Shizuka Satomi. In what ways could Katrina be different from the previous six souls of musical prodigies that Satomi gave to the devil? In addition, is Katrina the trick to finding the *right* soul that is mentioned on the page before chapter 1?
- In Chapter 16 we see Satomi and Lan get into an argument when Lan finds out the truth about Satomi. We also learn how they feel afterwards. Put yourself in one of their shoes' and describe how you would have handled the situation, either from Satomi's defensive side or Lan's questioning side, and describe how you would have felt after.
- Write a short piece from the perspective of one of Miss Satomi's past students. Think about the time they lived in, what clothes they would wear, how they would act. Would Miss Satomi be any different? It can be from any point in their life, and think about their main ambition and insecurity or hindrance they are facing
- Research the meanings behind food in this novel. Pick one or two foods and describe the symbolization behind them. Then pick a scene where food is involved and break down the scene. Think about what food is provided in that scenario. Is it to comfort? Is it to bring people together? For example, tangerines can represent happiness and prosperity. The neighbors give Shizuka tangerines and this could be seen as a sign of neighborly affection.
- Throughout *Light From Uncommon Stars*, countless violinists are referenced. Amongst the slew of names are Henry Schradieck, Bach, Mozart, Leopold Auer, and many more. Please pick one of the musicians that is referenced throughout the book and put together a brief biography – *no more than a page or so long!* This assignment can be submitted in whatever format you choose (pres, docs, word, canva, etc.). You must include *at least* the following: the violinist's lifespan, where they lived, how they learned how to play, and a famous piece by them.
- There is a heavy emphasis on the 'family of choice' in this novel. Write a short excerpt on why you believe or do not believe that choosing your family is powerful. One question you may ask yourself is does blood always have to equal family?

SELECTED PASSAGES FROM THE NOVEL

FEBRUARY

“Why had she let it come to this? Why couldn’t she be what her parents wanted?

Part of her was in a panic. *What have you done? Apologize. Knock on their door right now. Says it’s all your fault-say you’re sorry, say you’ll promise to change”* (5).

“Lan’s donut meant a future. Her donut meant family.

In the night quiet, Starrgate Donut hummed, almost like a starship. Stationed in the front, her twins Windee and Edwin navigated the donut case, stocking it with galaxies of sweet, colorful lemon creams, apple fritters, double chocolates, Boston cremes, twists” (21).

“When she was younger, the Jaguar had seemed overpowered and loud. But with each passing year, she could better appreciate how timelessly it navigated the everyday chaos around her, yet never lost its singular, insatiable thirst for gasoline” (34).

“This was very different from Tokyo, where there was almost a desperation to either be at the forefront of change or to guard against it at all costs. Be it Harajuku, Meiji Jingu, Akihabara, each was defined by a strict relationship to, and profound respect for, change.

Here, change had continued with so little fanfare or notice that change had become, well, mundane” (34).

“What the girl held was no Stainer—it was a mere beginner’s instrument—but echoes of hatred, of insanities, of melodies one sings only when one has survived emanated from her just the same” (37).

“School of Violin Technics, by Henry Schradieck. First published in 1901.

The book was probably there because all the markings, annotations, scribbles, and teacher’s notes made the book unsellable.

But for Katrina, each suggested fingering, each message penciled over notes or inked into a margin offered an encouragement and direction that she had never before seen” (39).

“As a violin teacher, Shizuka knew exactly how to bring out a student’s best technique. As a performer, she could read a concert hall without thinking.

But how does one talk to a person as a *person*? She was never good at that. If she had been, she would never have needed to play the violin” (57-8).

“Pawnshops and musicians have a long history. Within so many pawnshops lay dreams lost, broken, never realized” (64).

“What made each of them right for Hell was their need for a lie, a façade so powerful, so intoxicating, that they could believe it themselves” (75).

“Lucy had been in this shop since she was a child. She had seen students sneer at worthy violins without a proper pedigree. She had seen them treat fifty-thousand-dollar instruments like servants, or toys.

This student was giving her violin nothing but love” (87).

“ ‘Miss Satomi, don’t you care? About me being trans?’

‘Katrina. In my business one does not care about bodies. One is only concerned with souls’ ” (90).

“Great music is all about weakness, uncertainty, mortality—what does Heaven know of these things?” (92).

“Because this violin was trying...even after all it had endured, this violin was trying, with all its soul, to sing” (92).

“Even now, his mother would flinch whenever she heard an unexpected noise, or anyone entered the store.

Such things are music, too” (97).

MARCH

“Lucy Matia pushed her plane forward. Slivers of ebony fluttered upon her lap.
When someone needs to fly, sometimes it’s best to pull the ground away” (116).

"She would apologize for being...
Being what?
A crazy, strange thought came into her head.
‘Don't I have a *right* to be who I am?’ ” (120).

“ ‘Miss Satomi-aren't you angry?’ Katrina asked.
‘Of course not. You have no *idea* what has been done in the service of music. However,
Katrina, with your talent, you have choices. There are a lot of different ways to fuck on camera.
Or onstage. Find a way that goes beyond a one-night stand, one that makes you larger than life.
At least find one that pays better’ ” (122).

“But Katrina had always *been* free. She had been free of acceptance, free of love, free of trust.
She now clung to anyone who would tell her which way to go, which way was safe, to anyone who
would give her a star” (128).

“ ‘When you’re trans, you’re always looking and listening,’ Katrina explained later. ‘It’s
following, but it’s more than that. You need to see what might be coming, hear the next danger
ahead’ ” (130).

APRIL

“ ...the planet’s scientists had already theorized a ‘Great Filter’ and spoke of a ‘Fermi Paradox,’
which Lan was sure were their first primitive conceptions of the Endplague.

Yet, instead of rushing to explore these theories, rather than discussing the speed of light,
mortality, or entropy, their most popular communications were about film stars, religion, dating
applications, games, and all matters of pornography” (145).

“Did Shirley really think she did not know? Did Miss Satomi really think- that she’d believe
she was being taught for nothing?
If being queer had taught her anything, it was that there was always a price” (162).

“How wonderful it must be, to be normal. But that was not her life, was it? Of course she was a freak. But for now, she was a freak with a roof over her head, learning to play music with a voice that was finally her own” (163).

“And even with all the justice and vengeance in the world, she would still pick up Aubergine and not know what, if anything, she contained” (173).

“Shizuka pointed at Katrina’s heart.

‘Everything the audience *hears*, what we strive to create...what we live to convey...it comes from here. In your hollows. In your nothingness.

There is where your music gains its life’ ” (174).

JUNE

“ ‘But eventually, they find, and solve, the mathematical equation that explains the entire universe....

and that will be your death sentence. For in that equation, there will be no forever, no eternity. *Nothing*.

And this collapse, and all its attendant despair, is the Endplague’ ” (188).

JULY

“From the darkness, Katrina willed her violin to build their world. To let there be light, let there be colors, then calculus and molecules and starlit vistas, let there be home after home after home where no one yelled and no one was beaten” (213).

“Paganini’s Caprice no. 5. Composed by Niccolò Paganini, the Devil’s Musician himself. Many of the era’s greatest virtuosi had thought Paganini caprices were too difficult for mortal hands, that his playing alone was proof of consort with the Devil” (215).

“But now, far away from the stage, Shizuka could see the audience, hear what Katrina’s music had done—and what it continued to do.

In the darkness and silence, she realized that Katrina’s music might be with them even now. And Katrina’s was a music that was not so different from her own” (218).

“ ‘It was the best feeling ever,’ she said softly. “Especially at the end. I felt like no one was going to hurt me. I felt safe, Miss Satomi. And powerful. So powerful that I could keep you, and everyone who was listening, safe as well.’ ” (222).

“And that was it. The answer did not lie in any combination of someone else’s secret recipes or ingredients—it was in the tastes not just of home, but of excitement, memory, love, belonging...What people truly hungered for.

If their donuts could evoke those feelings, then customers were sure to return” (228).

AUGUST

“Katarina Guarneria?

Of *course*. Suddenly, the Satomi Guarneri made sense.

Katarina was del Gesu’s wife....she completed and even built, many Guarneri violins on her own. But throughout history many of those instruments had their labels removed or altered, because no one would buy a violin made by a woman.

Lucy picked up the violin and examined it more closely. Yes, it was easy to miss, if one were not specifically looking for it, but indeed, this label had been altered.

Someone had tried to erase the maker from history” (248).

“And there it was. The inability to obey a direct order was a terminal malfunction. If anything proved she was defective, it was that.

‘Shirley?’

“It’s fine. I am sure my mother can create another maintenance program—one that obeys her and doesn’t cause trouble’ ” (254).

“Even Miss Satomi didn’t know how difficult it was when you didn’t feel real. Even Miss Satomi didn’t know how it felt when the only real thing genuine about you was the hurt your existence caused” (256).”

“ ‘Your replicated donuts didn’t sell did they? Funny, that. Your technology couldn’t even copy a donut, and now you’re saying you’ll copy Shirley?’ ” (259).

“For your music, the music you would die for—even give your soul for—is a music that not even Hell can hear” (277).

“..for nearly fifty years, I have lain awake each night wondering how I’d escape damnation—not from Hell but from the fear that my music—my truest, genuine music—was just a lonely, pathetic dream” (280).

“ ‘Miss Satomi,’ Katrina muttered, ‘is not just playing the music of Bartók. She’s playing the music of us’ ” (285).

NOVEMBER

“Some people were accusing others of being like Nazis, while others said Katrina deserved justice.

But in all this, where were the comments about the music?....

And with one disclosure, Tremon had split Katrina from her music as cleanly as he’d cleaved Shizuka from hers” (297-98).

“ ‘Imagine what would happen if they could perceive their lives not as separate sections to be entered and left behind, but with a continuous forward, backward and all places in between?

‘Lan, what would happen if someone played their existence not only to its inevitable end, but also to its inevitable beginning?

‘What if someone played their music to its inevitable *everything?*’ ” (314).

FEBRUARY, AGAIN

“The music you were hearing, surely you recognize it now.

To win a game without killing. To create a world” (347).

“Floresta laughed, then gave Ynez a donut.

‘So you came from far?’ she asked.

‘Yes, ma’am, with family,’ said Ynez” (363).

AND BEYOND TIME ITSELF

“Most often, however, we arrive at planets like this one...long forgotten after the Endplague has left them for dead.

I played Handel. The survivors cried. They told me of the crimes they had committed. I told them of mine.

Many were angry. More were ashamed. They asked, ‘Do we even have the right to hear this music? Is this okay?’

But as I played, they listened. And slowly, their music welcomed them home” (368).