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ACCEPT
YOUR DEFEAT
GRACEFULLY...



YUNA KIM WAS ROBBED!
SOUTH KOREA WAS ROBBED!
THE OLYMPIC COMMITTEE IS
GOING TO HEAR FROM US...

OR COMPLAIN
ABOUT THE
JUDGING!

JH19

MY TURN

■ Marie Lo



Reviewing writers of color

Amee Phan, author of the short story collection *We Should Never Meet* and novel *The Reeducation of Cherry Truong*, recently wrote about the lack of reviews writers of color receive in mainstream media, which prevent writers of color from reaching a wider readership. Her piece, "Why Mainstream Critics Fail Writers of Color," published in *Talking Writing*, an online magazine for writers, must have touched a nerve. It generated a ripple of discussions online, and Phan was recently interviewed about her piece by Jian Gimeshi on his radio program, *Q*.

Book reviews are crucial to introducing books to the public, and Phan argues that even if writers of color are getting published, they are disproportionately overlooked in mainstream media book reviews. Phan cites research conducted by professor and writer Roxanne Gay along with a graduate student, which demonstrated that in 2011, for example, 90 percent of the books reviewed in *The New York Times* were by white authors. *The New York Times* is often considered a gatekeeper of literary fiction so the lack of reviews of works by writers of color perpetuates their marginalization and reinforces the idea that their writing only appeals to other readers of color and not the general reading public.

The invisibility of writers of color in mainstream media is even more troubling in contrast to the excessive media attention paid to books like Amy Chua's memoir *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, which seems to affirm the stereotypes the general public already has about Asian Americans as the model minority. As Phan points out, Asian-American writers who do not cater to mainstream expectations — such as Bill Cheng with his recent novel about the south, *Southern Cross the Dog* — are either completely ignored or criticized for being "inauthentic." The implication, of course, is how dare writers of color draw on their imagination as opposed to their experiences as a minority.

The fact that Phan's piece caused such a stir both surprises me and does not surprise me. When I teach Asian-American literature classes, I am often moved by students who tell me they are grateful to learn about a literary and cultural history they knew little about. And yet, in teaching Asian-American literature as a distinct course, I am cognizant of the fact that I am perpetuating the per-

ception that Asian-American literature is separate from American literature, replicating the bifurcation between mainstream media that reviews white American authors and important alternative media that focuses on promoting works by writers of color.

I know this discussion may seem like an insular conversation whereby critics write about other critics — a family feud of little interest to the general public — but Asian-American literature is American literature, a fact that cannot be overstated. And mainstream book reviews are arbiters of literary value and often determine the parameters of what is culturally significant. Literature is both a mirror of our cultural values and an opportunity to expand our perspectives on what counts as American culture. If that literature does not reflect the diverse perspectives that make up our society, then we are reduced to seeing the world only through the eyes of white writers, who, unlike writers of color, are allowed the freedom to imagine worlds populated by characters of different ethnicities and races.

In the radio interview with Jian Gimeshi, Phan argues about the power of literature to expand our view of who we are as a society. "These books will actually do wonders if you read them to clear up the misconceptions and give you a fuller, more vibrant picture of a community you may have dismissed before," she said.

In light of a recent report presented in congress by the Sikh Coalition about the widespread incidents of severe bullying of Sikh children in schools, there is an added urgency to Phan's words. In the post-9/11 climate of increased discrimination and racism aimed at Muslims, as well as ignorance about Islam, Sikh children who wear turbans have become targets of intense bullying. One of the obstacles to better understanding Sikhs and the Sikh religion: the absence of or negative representations of Sikhs in schoolbooks.

I am not saying that literature can solve the problems of racism and bullying, but we need to be able to read about the diversity of who we are as well as expand our notions of literary works worth reading, promoting, and teaching. What is ultimately at stake in this debate about literature and book reviews is what it says about who is an American, and whose experiences, lives, and perspectives are the ones we should identify with.

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