March 11, 2020

Dear Matthew, Maggie, Rose, Elaine, Joanna, Elsa, Yuling, Xiaoying, and Monica,

First of all, thank you for reading my book. It’s an honor and a delight for me. So many tens of thousands of new books come out every year, and of course there are also the countless books we already have, so whenever a book club chooses one of my books, I really feel lucky. In this case, you all are also the farthest-away-from-me (that’s the technical term!) book club I have ever been aware of, so that’s an added honor.

Though you’re all very far away, this seems like a moment at which our situations probably have a lot in common. Because of the arrival of coronavirus in my area, life here in Brooklyn, New York feels very precarious and confusing. I cannot think of a single previous time that life felt so difficult to understand on such a vast scale. Friends of mine who are never rattled are in this case profoundly concerned. At the same time, reactions are utterly fragmented. Some feel concern for themselves and their families only, and are panic-buying as many household cleaning products as they can find. Others feel concern for the society as a whole, for our upcoming election, for cultural practices; and on a daily level, no one can even decide whether or not to go to the gym, or keep their children home from school, or take their laptop to the corner café as usual. Precautions seem both paranoid, and inadequate. We have, as you can probably tell from the outside, very weak leadership at the top, and this is affecting everything and perhaps the most frightening aspect of all.

On a more personal note, I learned this morning that my university has closed and moved all classes online, so later today I will have to learn how to conduct a meeting on Zoom, just as you all are doing! This is not my strong suit so I hope it’s not too difficult.

And so as I’ve said, it is nice to think of you all, on the far side of the globe, reading my book and perhaps deriving some interest and distraction from it. Thank you for providing me the pleasant interest and distraction of writing to you.

Your questions are excellent and challenging, and I’ll do my best to give them adequate answers.

*Which of the characters do you identify with the most in the novel, and do you see yourself in any of the characters?*

I see a lot of myself in both Sarah and Karen (a character you may not have yet met). Sarah, in particular, has a lot of intellectual intelligence for a girl her age, but much less emotional intelligence, and as a result, she hurts others, and herself. My experience of adolescence certainly partook of that problem. Also, Sarah longs to be a performer but is, frankly, not very talented, and that was true of me as well.

*Sexuality seems to be a prevalent theme within the novel.  Can you explain why?*

I’m very fascinated by the adolescent or ‘teen years’ because they are so in-between: we are no longer children, yet we are not yet adults, and the mixture of maturity and immaturity can be very volatile. Sexuality is a big part of this; young people are very sexual yet also very inexperienced, and the quandary, for adults, is how to guide them through this precarious period of life without exploiting them. As I see it, the adults in this book mostly fail at that task.

*Can you explain more about the character development of Mr. Kingsley?  (note: we are still in "Part 1")*

My intention was for Mr. Kingsley to be both intensely charismatic and brilliant, and at the same time deeply flawed - one of those adults who, as I say above, fail at the task of guiding the young people in their charge. What was most important to me was that Mr. Kingsley not be a two-dimensional villain but a fascinating and complex man who truly does believe he has the best interests of his students at heart. We should understand and relate to the students’ ardent desire for his approval.

*What is the significance of the underlying theme of "theatre" for the setting?*

Hm, I’m not sure I can answer regarding theme! But I wanted to write about a theatre program for young people because it seemed like a great way to explore the idea I mention above, of the dangerous in-betweenness of teens, the ways in which they can both be adults, and children. Theatre training demands a level of emotional maturity teens are able to perform, but perhaps don’t really possess.

*Can you expand upon the idea of unconventional use of Capitalization?*

Ha, that drove the copy editors of this book insane. I felt that the students, in their minds, Capitalized certain words for emphasis, to denote the greater importance of these ideas to them.

*A course like "Creative Writing" is not offered at our university since our focus is STEM.  Do you view writing as a solely liberal arts-based notion, or do you also find students from a Math and Science background who relate to the creative ideas needed to write a novel like this?*

I think creative writing is a subject that ought to be taught across every field of study because it is in my opinion the best way to teach effective communication skills that you might use whether you end up a novelist, like me, or a scientist or entrepreneur or politician or anything else. I know a very successful business woman who has built her own brand from nothing; she majored in English! And, she explicitly identifies her background in creative writing as the skill that enabled her to position her product in such a way that people flocked to it. In this country, where science education is really very weak, I’ve long noticed that the scientific concepts that really take hold are those that have been effectively popularized by gifted writers who know how to tell a good story. And to turn this around, some of my best student writers, where I teach, actually come from the sciences; in my current 12-student seminar, one of my most remarkable writers is a math major. It’s his particular perspective on the world that makes his writing so singular. And so I don’t think there should be walls between these disciplines; crossing back and forth between these disciplines strengthens the disciplines themselves, and their practitioners.

Hopefully we’ll all soon be able to literally cross back and forth again between all the various different places we like to be, and won’t feel so isolated and anxious. Meanwhile thank you again for reading me and for reaching out.

All my best wishes,

Susan Choi