INTERSECTIONS RADIO

JENNIFER YU

TRANSCRIPT

SARIKA MEHTA: You are listening to Intersections Radio, the podcast where we geek out on all things intersectionality. I'm your host, Sarika Mehta. Welcome, and thanks for tuning in.

Now, I've been wanting to do more episodes on the complex issues of mental health, especially as they play out in our Asian American communities. Specifically, they don't, and really, on the one hand, it's considered weak and humiliating to air such quote unquote "dirty laundry," and on the other hand, I wonder if even, you know, at this basic level our languages have words to describe the issues that our face, much less the ability to explain some of these concepts across our intersectional lives.

So, I am thrilled to chat with author Jennifer Yu about her debut novel, Four Weeks, Five People. This novel follows five teenagers who attend a camp in the woods in upstate New York over the course of four weeks of group therapy, and there's some very unique characters in the story, including an Asian American girl with obsessive compulsive disorder who finds safety in numbers. And there's also a boy who struggles with anorexia, and another boy with narcissistic disorder.

The novel follows their experiences from each of their points of view, and as they relate to each other. And Jennifer Yu wrote this novel as a way to come out and cope with her own experiences with depression and anxiety. She joins me today by phone from Boston. This is Intersections Radio. Jennifer Yu, thank you so much for joining me on Intersections Radio.

JENNIFER YU: No, thank you so much for having me.

SARIKA MEHTA: Tell us a little bit about yourself first, for our listeners.

JENNIFER YU: Sure. So, I am 21, and I live in Boston, and I graduated last May from the University of Pennsylvania. I majored in creative writing, and I've sort of spent, you know, my entire life writing, but recently I was super, obviously, over the moon to have my first novel published. So, it's called Four Weeks, Five People, came out a couple of months ago and it's, like, on the shelves now, so, it's just obviously, the entire process has just been like a dream come true.

SARIKA MEHTA: Yeah, congratulations to you for this, well, debut novel coming out, and all of the press that you've received, and as you were mentioning about college, one of the interesting facts that I learned about you is that when you were in college you

really tried to avoid majoring in creative writing.

JENNIFER YU: Yeah, so, when I started university, I was pre-med, which is, I'm sure, as many of our Asian American listeners will understand, it's sort of par for the course for many teenagers from Asian American households that there's this sort of expectation that you're going to be like a doctor, if not a doctor a lawyer or engineer, and so writer is definitely not on the short list of desirable professions.

So there's definitely a sense, like, as I was going through university of like, okeh, like, I know I love to write, and I know I love to read, and I know I love, like, English as a subject, and I always have. But, that's something that's just not feasible, it was like, you know, something you do professionally or something you pursue once you sort of become an adult.

So, when I started school, I was pre-med, and then eventually I, like, eventually I just sort of gave in and I was like, you know what? Like, writing, English, it's something that I love to do, and, you know, I really want to at least spend, you know, these four years doing it. And it was a risk that a lot of people have different opinions on, but I think that the risk paid off, so, I'm happy.

SARIKA MEHTA: Yeah, absolutely. It is a risk, as you were saying, for a number of reasons that we'll get to in a second. When you ended up going for the English major, when you finally committed to this field, how did you feel about it? Were you relieved, were you scared, like, oh I'm in it now. Well, how did you feel?

JENNIFER YU: Oh, I mean, I was definitely terrified. And I was terrified because I think my entire life, there's been a very sort of conventional narrative, and pretty like restrictive narrative of what it means to be successful, and what it means to sort of live up to people's expectations of you. And so, I was of course just scared that I was failing, failing my parents, failing myself, and failing my community, failing my friends. And that, if I did do this, like, English major, then eventually I would homeless and that, you know, my parents would have immigrated to America for nothing, and all -- all of this dramatics.

So I was of course very scared, in that sense, I think. Choosing to major in English was not just about what am I going to study for the next four years, it was this -- it sort of represented sort of bigger ideas about like what's acceptable to do with your life, and what's like a worthwhile usage of time.

So I was definitely, I was definitely afraid. But I was also happy, because it meant that I was prioritizing my own happiness over what other people might say is the correct course of action, so I was also like proud of myself for having the courage to pursue something that I liked.

SARIKA MEHTA: And hence the risk that you took to follow this field. How do you feel about that decision retrospectively? At the time, you know, you said you were terrified,

and afraid of letting down a number of people and your community. How do you feel about this decision retrospectively?

JENNIFER YU: I'm, I mean, I'm so happy that I did it, like, if I hadn't decided to like pursue English, I probably never would have written. I mean, I would have written for fun, but I certainly, I don't think, would have written the novel that I wrote. And I wouldn't have met the amazing community of, like, writers and professors that I met at Penn, and I think there's like a whole side of my intellectual and academic experience that I like wouldn't have been able to experience. So I'm really, I'm really happy in hindsight.

SARIKA MEHTA: Good, good. Well, let's just talk about your book, because not only did you take the risk of following this field and following your passion, you're talking about a very intense issue that is not comfortable to, I think, you know, our society. As I mentioned in the introduction, your book dives right into this issue that plagues our communities, and then we don't assume they even have the support needed to talk about mental health in Asian American communities.

Let's start maybe with the characters in the story. Introduce them to us.

JENNIFER YU: Sure. Yes, so, there are five characters, as the title of the novel says. The first is Stella, and Stella is quintessentially depressed in that she's very unhappy, and she's angry, but she's also scared that it's going to be like this forever, and she's never going to be happy again.

We have Andrew, who is struggling with an eating disorder, and of course that's not the only thing around Andrew, he is, he's filled with passion, he's actually one of my favorite characters because he's so passionate and he's so sincere, he's so kind. But, you know, his eating disorder is sort of taking over his life and that's something that he has to deal with.

Then there's Clarissa, who is an Asian American character, who has OCD. And I think a large part of her arc is dealing with the fact that she feels like her mental illness is letting the people who love her down. That, you know, she is never going to experience the things that her mom, for example, wants her to experience.

Then there's Ben, who kind of lives inside his own head a little bit more than is healthy. He likes movies more than he likes real life, and he's prone to disassociating from reality and just sort of like experiencing everything from an arm's length.

And then finally there's Nathan, who just doesn't, you know, really think that he should be there, and he sort of thinks he's better than everyone else, and he's like, and you know, honestly convinced that all the people there are just sort of weak, and irrational. And so we see, you know, that conflict spin out, with a character who's forced to be there, he can't escape, but he just doesn't think he has anything to gain from being there, and is very resistant to people's attempts to convince him otherwise.

SARIKA MEHTA: Right, so those are the characters, and they're, you know, in this group therapy out in the wilderness for four weeks together, which can have many different adventures along the way. And as I understand it, as I mentioned in the introduction, you had written this kind of based on your own experiences. Do you want to talk about that a little bit.

JENNIFER YU: Sure. I mean, certainly not every plot point in the novel is, like, fueled by my own experiences.

SARIKA MEHTA: Of course.

JENNIFER YU: And it's by no means an autobiographical work. But, I think, I wrote this novel, or I began this novel, at a time, [inaudible], so it was a year where I had experienced some pretty bad depression and anxiety related issues, and I had gone to a lot of therapy, and I had specifically gone to a group therapy, and coming out of all of that, and, it was sort of still very much going on, I started writing the novel very much as -- as I was processing my feelings about my own relationship with mental health, about, you know, settings and therapy, about, like, communities who come together because of mental illness, and about, like, the experience of being in group therapy, where everyone is sort of dealing with their own struggle, and you all come together, and, it's very difficult at first to see what you have to offer each other, but somehow, the setting is oftentimes therapeutic and very effective.

And so, I was sort of processing my own feelings of fear, and sadness, and anxiety, processing all that, and I was spending a lot of time with other, sort of, other people experiencing things who were similar but also sometimes completely different. And I think a lot of those things worked their way into the novel through the characters and also through the process of therapy that they go through.

SARIKA MEHTA: Yeah, it doesn't have to be an autobiographical experience, but just something, some thread from your life that maybe inspired the story. Was it -- was it scary to write this story, or, what were you feeling throughout the process?

JENNIFER YU: You know, I get asked that quite frequently, actually, I get asked, like, oh was it, was it scary? And my answer is always no, because when I was writing it, I really ddi not think that anyone would ever read it, and I was writing it for a class, so I thought, okeh, like, the people in my workshop class will read a couple of chapters here and there, when it's like my turn to workshop. And -- but other than that, I was pretty certain that this would just sort of, let it die on my laptop.

And as a result, there wasn't really any fear, because I was just sort of writing what I wanted to write, and translating my thoughts and my feelings onto the page, and then I figured no one would ever read it, and everything would be fine. So the actual process of writing it was not that scary. However, the publication process and what followed while of course, intense, in truth was pretty scary in that it meant sort of shipping out deeply

personal work and all writing is personal, but this is, like, especially personal for me, to, like strangers and people who make a value decision, so, that was scary. But the actual crafting process, I think, was not.

SARIKA MEHTA: Yeah, I can imagine the publication process was frightening. I mean, it would be anyway, but there's an extra added layer of it. Related to that, you know, so, for example, the character Clarissa, who is an Asian American girl, as we said, working through obsessive compulsive disorder, OCD, you know, and in the story, what I found interesting, because I talk to a lot of authors, people of color, who I think are on this line based on different trends of what is happening in literature in our communities. I think there are different trends of, I'm writing from the Asian American experience, and now it's like, well, just because I'm an Asian American person, I don't have to write from that experience, I can just write, and there is a character who is a person of color and things like that.

So, what I'm getting to is that, with Clarissa, we're talking about her character, her personality, the issues she's dealing with, and her relationship with her mother, and there's nothing in the story that says things like, oh I'm afraid I might let my community down, or we don't talk about this in our community. And so I was curious, what are your thoughts about that?

JENNIFER YU: I mean, on the subject of Clarissa never sort of saying those things, I think part of it is just that she's very removed, like, there are -- all the characters are pretty isolated, so she's not necessarily thinking about, you know, her community, or anything like that, but I think she does think about her mom, and she does think about the expectations that, you know, her mom has for her, and they aren't directly linked. Like, she doesn't directly make a connection to that being related to her being Asian American.

I don't think that means that the connection doesn't exist. I think it just means that maybe she hasn't realized it yet, or that's not what's on her mind at the moment. I do think what you're saying about, in Asian American communities in particular, like, mental health is a topic that's really difficult to discuss and very, sort of not frequently discussed. That I think is a really salient point, and it's something that, you know, I certainly noticed in my community, and, you know, I've talked to my friends who are Asian American, and they've also noticed in their community as well.

As a whole, in our community, there's not a lot of dialogue about mental health, and yeah, I've actually said before, it really does feel sometimes the vocabulary is not there. And it doesn't mean that Asian American parents don't want their kids to be happy, that's obviously not the case, it's just there's not a tradition of those conversations taking place, and as a result, people find it difficult to have those conversations when they're older. And then they probably find it difficult to have those conversations with their kids, and then it's sort of a feedback loop.

SARIKA MEHTA: Right, exactly. And that was part of that fear of writing this that I was

talking about, just, where at a very basic level of having these conversations, and on the flip side, you know, even if people go out and find support and help, are the medical professionals in the field equipped to handle this, you know, are they fluent in the issues that afflict the communities, are they culturally aware, I guess is what I'm trying to say.

JENNIFER YU: Yeah, I think as with sort of any, any issue like this, the conversation, or your own experiences, are affected, of course, by every aspect of your identity, and so the most effective conversation for an Asian American woman to have about her experiences of depression, or her experiences of an eating disorder, are really different from the most effective conversation that a white man might have about his eating disorder. Like, those are just fundamentally different experiences.

And so, I think there's certainly something to be said for more dialogue, from communities where there's traditionally a lack in dialogue, to start thinking about those things, to start thinking about, like, you know, in our community, what's the most effective way to talk about this, what's, you know, maybe some of the driving factors behind depression in Asian American communities, that might be particular to being Asian American, you know. And I think, obviously I don't have the answer, but, those conversations are really important.

SARIKA MEHTA: Absolutely. I want to move to another topic, a bigger issue of recovery. So, after reading this book I had -- I just had some thoughts about the issues that go into this whole experience. We have a pretty expensive camp, in the wilderness, for this small group of teenagers. So we have to consider there's an economic component, and then there's a cultural component, which we've already been discussing.

And of course, you know, the reason for them being there, this treatment component. And all of these issues go hand in hand. So when we're thinking about recovery, you know, for example, I could imagine parents, for better or for worse, I'm not condoning, I'm just imagining that they would say, you know, I just paid twenty thousand dollars for this camp, I want to see results in my kid. I want my child back. But on the other hand, it's a four week camp, and I don't know, is that a realistic timeframe to learn to cope with these issues. And I was just curious about your research and your thoughts on this.

JENNIFER YU: Yeah. So, first, I will say that, like, the economic component is a huge factor, and I think that's -- that's oftentimes overlooked. I've had a lot of conversations with people after writing the book about how race plays into conversations about mental illness, how gender plays into conversations about mental illness, but this is actually I think the first time anyone's brought up the economic side and I think that's so, so critical, and honestly, a camp like this would definitely be extremely expensive, and you would have to have parents who could afford to send their kids there, and I think that's true for a lot of aspects of mental health treatment, is it's really expensive. Therapy is really expensive, co-pays can be really high.

And so I just want to say thank you for bringing up that, that side of things, because

oftentimes recovery is enabled -- well, it is, recovery is enabled by having, like, the sort of financial resources to do that.

So, that's, I think, a great point that people don't talk about very often. And then, to your second point about, you know, it's a four week camp, does recovery happen in four weeks? I mean, I think we all know that the answer to that question is no, right?

No one -- it was really important to me that I did not write a story where five kids just go into like mental health camp and then they come out and they're like better, or fixed, or they've recovered completely, because, you know, that's very not true to life, and I think something that I really struggled with, at various points of my life is, the pressure to become better, or to fix myself, or to overcome mental illness, was oftentimes as stressful and like as debilitating as being depressed, or the thought of I'm pre-depressed, which is a struggle in and of itself, and then, this idea that I need to become better tomorrow, or I need to go to therapy because then it will make me the person that I used to be. I think there's a lot of pressure that people put on themselves to overcome through willpower, or, you know, through internal strength.

And it was really important to me that I didn't write a book where characters will themselves into being better, because oftentimes that's really not how the process of recovery works. So I would just say, like, at the end of the novel, like, not all the characters have recovered. I think some of the characters have moved forward on the path of recovery, which has, you know, forward progress as well as setbacks. Some of the characters have certainly moved forward.

I think there are other characters who may not have moved forward as much, and I think that is as much a part of the process of recovery as those moments where you sort of hit your head against the wall and you don't feel like you're making progress. That's as much part of the process of recovery as those, like, hallelujah, come to jesus moments where, you know, you've had some insight about yourself or your own experiences.

So I really wanted to capture both of those things, and I think in some ways that's led to a book that folks will find less satisfying at the end, because things aren't all wrapped up, the closure is not perhaps as closed as one might want. But it was just important to me from your principled standpoint, and from like a lived experience standpoint, to tell a story about mental illness where total recovery is not the end of the story.

SARIKA MEHTA: Yeah, I mean, what are the expectations, and what is the process along the way? These are the conversations that nobody has, and I don't know if it's -- obviously it's because our society, you know, still has a lot of taboos around mental health, but I don't know if it's also a confidentiality issue, or what. Recovery in any sense takes much longer, and takes a lot more work, than I think the discussion that goes into it, whether it's mental health, or a recovery from something physical, there's just so much that we don't discuss, and I appreciated that you had depicted this in that way, that it was a process and that there were conversations, and everything wasn't just wrapped up with a

neat bow at the end. I actually appreciated that about the book, and especially because this is geared towards a certain age group.

I'm really curious, but have you received any responses from the community?

JENNIFER YU: Yeah, I mean, so first of all thank you for saying that, that's really kind. I'm happy to hear that. I've gotten some lovely, just really moving responses, like, I had struggled with depression and this is really true to my experience, or, this is part of the reason why eating disorders are so hard to overcome, or like so hard to recover from.

And so I've had some people who have been really grateful, and they've reached out through Twitter, which is -- it's really surprising. Every time I hear something like that, I'm really -- I really do feel like it is really worth it. Like, I know that's such a cliche, but it actually does kind of feel like that. You get one person who says, hey, this meant a lot to me, and you're like, okeh. I will keep writing.

SARIKA MEHTA: That's nice to hear. We're just coming to a close here. Is there anything else you wanted to share before we close?

JENNIFER YU: The thing that I'm most happy about, this entire book process, which I like never, ever knew [inaudible], what I'm most happy about is that it's allowed me to have conversations with people about mental health, about my culture, about stuff like that, that otherwise I just never would have been able to have. And I think that's the thing that I'm most grateful for, is that this process of writing and publishing this book has allowed me to have so many conversations that have made me respect about my own experiences and the experiences of other people.

And I just, I encourage, like, other people to have those conversations as well with their communities, with people outside of their communities, with their parents, with their friends, if they're depressed, if they see that like one of their friends is going through really hard times. I'm grateful that my book has enabled me to have those conversations with other people, and has enabled people to have those conversations with each other, and I hope that other people feel empowered, not necessarily by my book, but just empowered in general, to have those conversations as well.

SARIKA MEHTA: Jennifer Yu, thanks so much for joining me on Intersections Radio.

JENNIFER YU: Thank you again for having me.

SARIKA MEHTA: That was author Jennifer Yu, and her debut novel is Four Weeks, Five People. To listen to the podcast of this interview, check out IntersectionsRadio.wordpress.com. Visit the same website for previous episodes of this podcast. And join the Facebook community at facebook.com/IntersectionsRadio. You are listening to Intersections Radio. I'm Sarika Mehta, Thanks for listening.