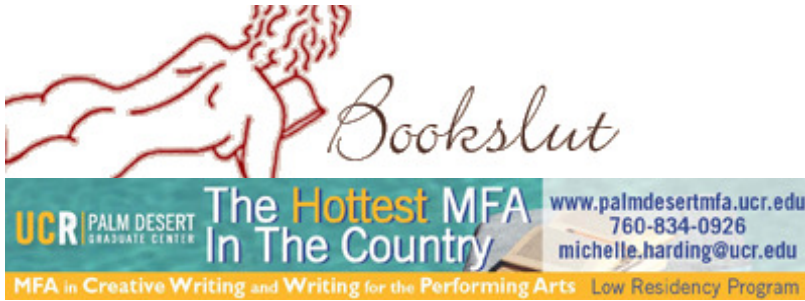


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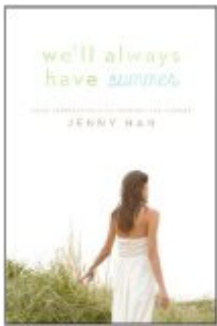
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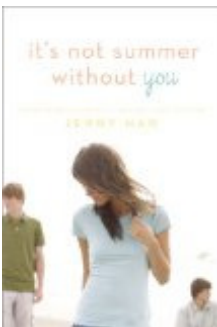
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An Interview with Jenny Han



In case you were unsure, that's [Jenny Han](#) as in "Han Solo," not Han as in "hand." Befitting of the bestselling young adult author that she is, she can recite all the dialogue from the cult film *Clueless*, and she gladly admits her adoration for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. She can eat sour gummy cherries nonstop, and likes her chocolate cake cold. If you're nice, she might just make you the perfect brownie. She wouldn't mind being Oprah's best friend, although she'd also be great as Santa's helper. She might have liked to have had Atticus Finch for a father, although she's pretty content with the parents she got, not to mention the little sister: "My sister was born two days after Christmas, and I always say she was the best Christmas gift my parents ever gave me. I love her more than chocolate cake, gummies, anything!"



Then there's Han's very special talent for nicknaming people and stuffed animals. That skill has definitely served her well while writing her novels, beginning with her first, [Shug](#), which debuted in 2006 for middle-grade readers. Han perfectly captures the changing, questioning voice of 12-year-old Annemarie Wilcox, better known as Shug, with her complex mother, her distant father, her difficult older sister -- and, most importantly, her new feelings for her whole-life best friend.

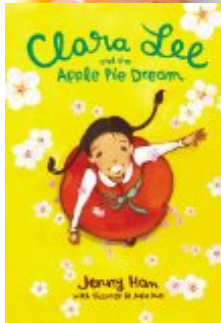


Three years later came the first of the *Belly Trilogy*, so named for about-to-turn-sweet-16 Isabel whose real life revolves around the summers at the beach, where two best friend mothers and their two children each spend idyllic months together. In 2009's [The Summer I Turned Pretty](#), Belly arrives transformed, and Jeremiah and Conrad, two brothers she's known her entire life, finally take notice. While *Shug* was fluffy fun, *Summer* was a sighing, dreamy pleasure. It's one of those books



that we mothers passed around to each other, any guilt over depriving our children relieved by our own nostalgic enjoyment of reliving that impossibly carefree feeling of abandoned youth.

Then came [*It's Not Summer Without You*](#), in 2010, when the death of Jeremiah and Conrad's mother turns the summer family upside down, and the grieving survivors must work their way back together again. This month, the third installment, [*We'll Always Have Summer*](#), finally arrives.



In between the *Belly* books, Han released another standalone title for MG readers, her first with a specifically ethnic protagonist. Like Han, the eponymous Clara Lee in [*Clara Lee and the Apple Pie Dream*](#), published earlier this year, is Korean American, "which means I was born in America but my blood is Korean," as Clara Lee explains. Like Han, Clara Lee is also spunky, imaginative, and just naughty enough to be lots of fun. And like Han, Clara Lee also has quite the memorable little sister: "Emmeline [the younger Lee] is based on [my sister]. In fact, I gave the illustrator [Julia Kuo](#) pictures of us from when we were little!"



So, being of Asian background, did you grow up with a "Tiger Mother"? A "Panda Father"?

Ha! To a degree, yes. My mom forced both my little sister and me to take piano lessons, we did math flashcards at night, we went to Korean school every Saturday morning. But both of my parents have always been incredibly supportive of my writing and of creativity in general. My sister loved to swim, I loved to read -- whatever we had a passion for, my parents supported. Besides, it became evident pretty quickly that I was never going to be a piano whiz or a mathlete. One other tigerish thing though -- we weren't allowed to go on sleepovers! That was the thing I longed for most of all -- sleepovers.

So if and when you have kids... cubs, beware of the Tiger?

If I'm a mom, I will definitely carry on the Asian tradition and make my kids do something they don't want to do. It's good for them. Builds character.

When did you know you wanted to be a writer? And how did you make that happen?

There has never been a time when I wasn't writing. When I was seven and eight, I wrote books about girls with leukemia or whose parents are getting divorced -- stuff I knew nothing about. At the time it seemed glamorous. In middle school, I wrote a story about me and my friends 10 years into the future. Oh, if only I could find that story now...

I took a Writing for Children class at [the University of North Carolina] and that was when I knew I wanted to write, edit, or teach children's books. After I graduated, I applied for many, many editorial assistant positions, a reading, writing, and literacy program at [the University of Pennsylvania], and the Writing for Children MFA program at New School. I got accepted to Penn first, but I was just waiting on the New School. I knew there was more security in a teaching degree, but I couldn't let go of my writing dream either. Besides, I've always been a gambling woman by nature. I was 22. I figured if it didn't work out, I'd have the rest of my life to pay off loans. Grown-ups spend that much on cars, why not make an investment on my future?

Congrats on making that investment mature into five books and counting! And the parents? Do they brag about you constantly to their fellow Korean churchgoers?

I hope not! But probably. Korean parents love to brag! Also, my Korean church community has been so supportive of

me over the years. They all come out to my signings, they all buy a book. At my last signing in Richmond, it was standing room only, and it really moved me to see them all out there.

The inevitable: Let's talk about race. So your first book, *Shug*, didn't have an APA [Asian Pacific American] protagonist. Was that a conscious decision? Not until your third, *Clara Lee and the Apple Pie Dream*, does ethnic background play a factor. How come?

This is a question I get asked a lot. I started writing *Shug* in college, and I saw her so clearly -- a skinny little girl with scabby knees and a flat chest in a small Southern town. The girl in my head was white. It was never a conscious decision to make her white, she just was. Had the story been from her Korean American best friend Elaine's point of view, it would have been an entirely different story.

Do you ever feel pressured by fellow writers, or so-called publishing experts, to write about APA characters? How do you respond?

No, I don't feel any pressure. I just want to write the stories I feel like writing. I've been working on a YA novel about a Korean American girl named Mina since I was in grad school. It was my thesis. I still want to tell that story, but it seems that other stories have jumped the line. And maybe some small part of it is fear -- fear of opening myself up in that way, fear of judgment from readers who may not identify with or understand the culture. I look at the response to [Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother](#), and also at the NPR review of the Korean novel [Please Look After Mom](#), and I can't help but think that some people just want to read about their own world view.

Not to digress, but funny enough, I [reviewed](#) Tiger Mother for the *San Francisco Chronicle* -- I was shockingly able to read it in a total vacuum before the viral frenzy broke out. And I gave [Please Look After Mom](#) a rare starred review in *Library Journal* -- I think it's one of the best novels I've read in years and years. I couldn't believe the ignorance (racism if I'm feeling totally blunt!) when I finally checked the NPR [review](#) after a number of friends (of diverse ethnicities, thank you) told me how insulted they were by it. Did you read either of the books? Any thoughts you might want to share on why some of the public reactions were so damning?

I'm in the middle of *Tiger Mother* and I'm really enjoying it. Isn't the whole point that she isn't a perfect mother? That the Tiger Mother way isn't always the right way? I think people read the one sentence blurb, have a kneejerk reaction, and don't bother to go any deeper.

As for *Please Look After Mom*, I've got it on my iPad but I've been too terrified to read it! I just know I'm going to weep and obsess over all the ways I could be a better daughter... So much of Korean identity is grounded in Confucian ideals -- obedience, filial piety, honoring your parents -- it's an essential piece of the culture. I really wish someone who understood that had reviewed the book for NPR. I mean really, what was the point of bringing up [Just Kids](#) [Patti Smith's memoir of her friendship with the late Robert Mapplethorpe]? It's apples and oranges.

But back to Belly. How did her trilogy originate?

It started out as one big story: summers in one girl's life, all leading up to one major moment. But as I got further into the story, I realized pretty quickly that there was no way it would all fit into one book.

Now three books later, will we see Belly again?

I think this is it. *We'll Always Have Summer* is her swan song.

So we'll be forced to look to another medium for more Belly! What about film rights? Might we see Belly on the big screen? And can we dream a bit? Who would you like to see play whom?

All I can say is that a very talented screenwriter is working on a script.

There are so many talented young girls working in movies and TV right now. Personally, I would love to see Chloe Moretz [*Diary of a Wimpy Kid*, upcoming in *Hugo Cabret*], who is just adorable and bright and lovely and smart, or Daveigh Chase, who was so great and strange as Rhonda on *Big Love*. Boywise, I'd love Hunter Parrish [*It's Complicated*, *17 Again*] for Jeremiah and pretty much anyone from *Friday Night Lights* is very welcome indeed.

Big news recently about your next project, a multi-book collaboration with fellow YA writer Siobhan Vivian ([Not That Kind of Girl](#), [Same Difference](#), [A Little Friendly Advice](#)). Can you share some news about that?

The first book in the trilogy is called *Burn for Burn*, and it's about three very different girls who come together to take revenge on the people who have wronged them. It's dark, but I think the heartbeat of the story is friendship and somewhere along the way, forgiveness.

How will the collaboration work, logistically speaking? How will you divide the work and do the day-to-day writing?

Siobhan and I have been BFFs and writing buddies for years now. We've always traded our own pages back and forth, so this is a pretty natural progression for us. Together, we outlined the whole book (something different for me, as I never outline) and broke the whole thing up into manageable, bite-sized pieces. Then we divvied it up and assigned parts. We'll each write our chapters, then trade and write comments, then revise, then trade again. When we have a full draft, we'll go through it with the whole thing printed out, line by line.

What is a typical writing day like?

Wake up late, putter around, contemplate going to the gym, go to coffee shop to write instead.

You have a wonderfully young, crisp, just-mischievous-enough writing voice that's perfect for the age of your readers. How do you stay "current"? How do you keep that young, teenage voice in your head?

This is the part that feels easy -- maybe because I'm pretty much a 16 year old at heart?

That said, have you thought about writing for adults? Is that in your future?

I feel very happy and fulfilled to be writing for young adults. I would one day love to write my grandmother's story, but I'm not quite ready for that yet. I guess we'll see!

And on the other side of the spectrum, what about writing for the youngest readers -- picture books and easy readers?

I'm working on a picture book now, and it's been a huge, huge challenge. It's a totally different skill set -- fingers crossed it will turn out okay!

Terry Hong writes a [book review blog](#) for the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Program.

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