

county**lines**
GETTING TO KNOW



A Few Questions with Author **ELLEN OH**

Interview by Carolee Noury // Photograph by Robin Shalota

Ellen Oh, author of middle grade and young adult stories, grew up in New York City and now resides in Bethesda. Happily turning from a career in law to one writing books, Oh credits Beltway traffic – in part – for the completion of her book *Prophecy*, the first book in Oh's heart-stopping trilogy about the greatest warrior in all of the Seven Kingdoms – a girl with yellow eyes. Oh is also the founder of the #WeNeedDiverseBooks (#WNDB) campaign. The #WNDB team seeks to educate publishers, authors and readers about the importance of books that feature characters who are authentically representative of humanity, hailing from all backgrounds and regions.

How does your past work as an attorney influence your writing?

I think that being an attorney formed the basis of my creative process by helping me organize my thoughts. I never write anything without a detailed outline and I am a research fiend. And I also have to know the conclusion of any story I write before I begin the first chapter. I guess I'm a goal-oriented type of writer.

How does a Brooklyn girl cope so far from home?

I miss New York pizza and bagels. But I usually go home to visit my parents every month so I survive.

You wrote *Prophecy* while stuck in Beltway traffic. Did any hints of that make it into your story?

Oh, you mean like anger? Frustration? Why yes! Yes, they did!

Do your daughters read your stories in progress?

They will read first drafts which I find incredibly helpful. In fact, my oldest daughter is the reason more favorite characters didn't die in the first

Prophecy book. She was quite indignant and yelled at me that I couldn't kill off everybody she liked. And when I wrote my first short story for the anthology *Diverse Energies*, I wasn't sure about it so I read it out loud to all three of my girls. By the end, they were all bawling their eyes out, which made me so happy that I sent it in to my editor right away.

What's your desert island book?

You meant to say books, right? Because no one could pick just one. Since *Harry Potter* is a series, I will count all seven as one and pack them in my Hermione purse that holds all things. These are timeless books that were meant to be re-read over and over again. And Jacqueline Woodson's *Brown Girl Dreaming* would go right in there on top because it is beautiful and lyrical and about an important time period in history. I would also pack *The Count of Monte Cristo* because it was my all-time favorite book as a kid and the reason I have an overdeveloped sense of justice and fair play. And *If I Stay* by Gayle Forman because I'm a sucker for books that make me weep. I'll stop there only because you

told me to keep my answers short.

What trend or pop-culture phenomenon from your teen years would you bring back if you could?

Well, since I was a teenager in the '80s, I'm gonna have to go with nothing, although I did love '80s music. That's about it.

If you could be anywhere in the world right now, where would you be and what would you be doing?

Krispy Kreme, eating donuts right off the conveyor belt.

What is the most surprising part of raising three girls?

How very different each of them are and how much I love and admire them all as individuals. I am a proud mama.

What's your superpower?

I have an incredible sense of smell. I have the ability to sense when a person has taken their shoes off several rows away in a crowded theater. It is more of a curse to be honest. I spend most of my time as a mouth breather simply because there are too many overpowering smells in the world.

People who wear too much perfume, I'm talking to you!

What course is missing from high schools?

Feminism. Women's studies. World history that is actually about the world and not Western-centric. But mostly feminism. I believe we should be teaching it from elementary school.