

# The BiblioFiles: Ellen Oh

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DR. DANA: The Cotsen Children's Library at Princeton University Library presents The BiblioFiles.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

DR. DANA: Hi, this is Dr. Dana. Today my guest is award-winning author Ellen Oh. Born in South Korea and raised in New York City, Oh was originally a "boring lawyer" (her words, not mine!) before she decided that writing children's and YA books is where her heart truly lies. Oh is also one of the founding members of We Need Diverse Books, a nonprofit organization with a mission to change how the publishing industry promotes and highlights the voices of marginalized authors, including (but not limited to) LGBTQIA+, Native, people of color, gender diversity, people with disabilities, and ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities.

It is difficult to summarize Ellen Oh's books because she delves into a prolific multitude of topics and genres. There is the spooky supernatural *Spirit Hunter* series, the classic fantasy of *The Dragon Princess* and the *Prophecy* series, the retelling of Asian myths in *A Thousand Beginnings and Endings*, the suspense and horror of *Haru: Zombie Dog Hero*, the touching historical novel, *Finding Junie Kim*, and the modern day *You Are Here: Connecting Flights*. She has also contributed essays and short stories to multiple collections.

Though Oh's range is vast, running through all her works are three beautiful threads: 1) Her wry sense of humor and perfect comedic timing; 2) Her experience as a Korean-American and what that means historically, personally, and culturally; 3) Her powerful strength in writing about difficult, painful, and terrifying things while still encouraging readers to have courage and faith.

Oh's most recent young adult novel is *The Colliding Worlds of Mina Lee*. It's senior year for Mina Lee, and her father has her life set and planned, and none of those plans involve art school. Mina pours her creativity into her webcomic, *The School of Secrets*. Suddenly and shockingly, she wakes to find herself actually *in* her webcomic, interacting with her characters. The stakes

are high, and the consequences serious, as her epic story twists, turns, and rockets to its conclusion.

Ellen Oh, thank you for coming on The BiblioFiles today.

ELLEN OH: Hi. Thank you for having me.

DR. DANA: I mentioned in the introduction that your range of genres is vast. So this first question might be deceptively simple. Is your process of writing the same for each book? Do you have multiple projects going at once? How do you do all this?

ELLEN OH: I think writing for me is very different for each book, but the process is the same, right? For example, I'm a heavy outliner. I have to start every story with a fully detailed outline, a character description outline, a world description outline. Then, most importantly, I always write my conclusion first. Because for me, that's the destination that I'm writing toward. But my brain is a really strange place. I usually have multiple storylines kind of playing all at the same time. I'm a very visual writer. So stories come to me as if I'm playing a movie.

The only one that didn't kind of work out that way was *Finding Junie Kim*, which was a heavily research-based book. So like of all my books, that was an outlier, because the story didn't come to me first, it came after all the outlining and research was done.

I mean, the premise of the story came because of a long-held narrative that my mom had told me about. The actual writing of it was very different from all my other books. I think, actually, it was my hardest book to write because of that.

But I really only write what I'm really interested in, subject matter-wise and story-wise. So I don't really think about, "oh, this time I'm writing a horror novel, this time I'm writing a contemporary, this time I'm pulling an anthology together." I do what moves me, what kind of decides to burst out of my head and say this needs to be written. So that's kind of the chaotic way I write. I'm both organized and chaotic.

[LAUGHTER]

DR. DANA: There are many truly fantastic heroes in your books. Some of them are classic fantasy heroes, like Kira in *Prophecy* and Jiho in *The Dragon Egg Princess*. There's also super heroesque Mina in *The Colliding Worlds of Mina Lee*.

Others are more quiet, like Ellen in *A Thousand Beginnings and Endings*. She has to stand up to her mother, who wants her to study something very different in college. There's even a nonhuman champion in *Haru: Zombie Dog Hero*. So all these heroes, all these characters, did you have any literary heroes you loved growing up? And for all these characters you create, how do you infuse your own heroes as a creative writer? What does this mean to you?

ELLEN OH: It's funny. Because I don't think of my characters as heroes, to be honest. They are just normal people with feelings and emotions and trauma and baggage, and they're just trying to get through their lives. Of course, every one of them has an issue that needs resolved, a problem that's happening, whether it's demons, or evil fairies, or a dragon mom. They've got a problem, and they have to figure out how to solve it.

That's really the basis of every single one of my stories. It's kind of like, that's how I see life. Every day is a struggle. Every day you have to get through something that is in your way. And how you get around that is our journey.

For me, I don't think of my characters as heroes. I just see them as just normal kids, trying to survive. I think, maybe, it's because my ultimate literary hero as a child was Meg Murry from *A Wrinkle in Time*. Because I got to be honest, I think she was the closest I've ever seen to somebody that felt kind of like myself, right? I never saw any Asian-American characters. But Meg was this awkward, belligerent—she got into fist fight—I got into fistfights a lot when I was younger. She was smart, but bad at math. I'm bad at math, also. She's clumsy. She's kind of a misfit. But she feels so real. She feels so sympathetic. She was who I saw myself modeled after. Somebody that you can say, “hey, you don't have to be perfect. You don't have to be beautiful. You don't have to be a genius. You can still make a difference in the world.” I think that's my literary hero.

DR. DANA: There are also some incredibly powerful grandmothers in your books. There is Grandma Lee, who fights malignant ghosts in *Spirit Hunters*, and Junie's grandmother in *Finding Junie Kim*, who survived the horrific Korean War. Please tell us more about how you bring these special women into your works.

ELLEN OH: It's funny because when I wanted to write *Spirit Hunters*, I really did want to focus on having kind of a grandma as a very strong and powerful character. The reason why was because I think our society is incredibly ageist. It always struck me as sad that we don't respect the older generation as much as we should.

It was kind of why, for me, in *Finding Junie Kim*, one of the things that Junie does is she records the stories of her elders before they're gone. I thought that was a really beautiful and important thing. It was something my daughter did with my parents. I was just, like, that's beautiful. We're trying to save the personal histories of our elders in our family. We want to look up to them. We want to respect them. We wanted to let them know that they are respected.

So writing characters that were grandmas that were strong and kick ass and powerful was my way of saying just because you get old, it doesn't make you any less of a strong, powerful, respected person in the world. That was really important to me, that grandmothers can be heroes still, right?

DR. DANA: Yes. They can. Researching this interview, I have to say that for me, *Finding Junie Kim* was by far the most intense read. You mentioned this earlier in the interview as well. In the author's note that concludes the novel, you mentioned that this is, in part, your family's history. Can you tell us more about that and what the experience of writing that history, this novel, was like?

ELLEN OH: Yes. So like I said, it was the hardest book for me to write. A lot of it is because there was so much research that had to be done. It took years to research it, also to interview a lot of the survivors of the Korean War. There was a lot of work that had to be done in terms of just researching the topic and finding everything I could and to really understand the subject matter.

So that was really labor intensive. At the same time, it's a story about my mother's personal experiences. It's the story about my children's experiences with bullying and with mental health. It was even harder, in a lot of ways, to write those chapters because of the emotional trauma that was part of having to retell a lot of the stories that I had lived through and that also that I know my mother had lived through. So feeling that personal connection to it made it that much harder in a way to write about.

DR. DANA: When you write difficult material like that, what do you build into your writing process to take care of yourself? Because I would argue that it's so important to do that.

ELLEN OH: Yes. I eat a lot of Krispy Kreme donuts and chocolate.

[LAUGHTER]

DR. DANA: That works.

ELLEN OH: I think, also, I don't consider myself an emotional writer. I also gave myself room to be so, right, to let myself cry while writing these difficult passages, something that I'd never really done. When it's so emotional, you have that moment, and it overwhelms you. Those feelings, you have to just let them go. Since I'm a lawyer by training, that's really hard to do, but I had to give myself the ability to do that. Say it's fine, Ellen. Just get emotional. Just cry while you're typing this scene. That's perfectly fine. I think that that was the only way I could get through some of those more difficult scenes, especially the ones that dealt with my children's mental illness. Because I was there. I had to take my kids to the hospital. They had to stay there for weeks at a time. That's not an experience that parents are ever going to not feel horrified by, the idea of you leaving your child in a hospital. It's the worst feeling. So I had to be OK with mining those feelings and just being emotional about it. Then, afterward, going and eating donuts and going to see a light movie, not a heavy movie, just do whatever it was to get myself out of that space again.

DR. DANA: I have to give special recognition to some of the dedications you write at the beginnings of your books. Most dedications are fairly standard expressions of gratitude, but yours are hilarious. I'm going to read a couple here.

From *Haru: Zombie Dog Hero*: "To Kiko who, like Haru, would never hurt me, even if she turned into a zombie dog. Her brother Tokki, though, would sell me out for McDonald's french fries."

ELLEN OH: That's true, though. He would.

[LAUGHTER]

DR. DANA: At the beginning of *Prophecy*, the dedication reads: "Mom, are you dedicating this book to us? Of course. Cool! We're going to be famous."

ELLEN OH: That was an actual conversation with my kids.

DR. DANA: And then, this last one in your newest book, *The Colliding Worlds of Mina Lee*: "This book is dedicated to Diet Coke, because I can't make it a day without you, you monster! And of course, to my family, whom I adore. But mostly, to Diet Coke."

[LAUGHTER]

ELLEN OH: Like I said, I can't live without it.

DR. DANA: There it is. Our listeners can't see it, but you literally have a Diet Coke with you. So walk us through the process of crafting the dedications in your books. Do you quickly jot them down the day before you send them to the publisher? Do they appear out of the blue during the writing process? Do you think about them for a bit? They're just unique.

ELLEN OH: I don't think about them at all, actually. Then when my editor asks me for the dedication, I just write whatever pops into my head at that moment. I just think for me, at that moment when I think about it, that's the reason why I wanted to write the book.

It's kind of how I do the dedications. When I wrote *Colliding Worlds*, I really did live on Diet Coke. So I was, like, yes, all right, there you go. There's my dedication. But one of my favorite ones was not my book dedication. It was, I think—I forgot what book it was, but the author said the book was dedicated to her mother, then she went on to say that she would have made a terrible doctor. I so related to that that I really wished I'd thought of it first.

So my dedications are really maybe just, like, a little—what do you call those, a postscript at the end, after you finished a book? I don't do my dedications before. I always do them at the end, after I'm done. It's my little postscript as to what I was thinking about or how I felt about the book, you know? So that's when I do them. Sometimes they're funny, and sometimes they're not.

DR. DANA: I did find one major and very awesome theme that runs through all of your work, and that is food. When I sit to read any one of your books, any genre, I know at any point I am

going to start drooling at even the briefest descriptions of dishes. So I'm wondering if you could read one of those descriptions from the collection *You Are Here: Connecting Flights*.

ELLEN OH: Sure. OK.

"Reaching an empty table, Soojin plopped herself into a chair and yanked off her purple mask. Her mother placed her large carry-on bag on the table and began pulling out small margarine, sour cream, and cream cheese containers that were filled with delicious Korean side dishes: myeolchi bokkeum, crisp little anchovies in a sweet-and-salty marinade; hobak jeon, battered and fried zucchini; and Soojin's favorite: gyeran mari, rolled eggs mixed with scallions, carrots, and ham. As her mother opened each container, Soojin slouched deeper in her seat, scowling down at the table."

DR. DANA: Yum. So please tell us, as a writer and feeder of your characters, tell us about this yummy, yummy food and what all of this means, as it runs through all of your writing.

ELLEN OH: Well, it's really simple. I love food. I plan most of my day around how I'm going to eat and what I'm going to eat. Even when I choose travel destinations, I'm more interested in great places to eat rather than the sites. I'm very food motivated. My dogs are, too. So my stories are always going to be filled with food because I think food is life, right? But on another kind of deeper level, I think food is the connection that we make as humans to each other and particularly ethnic food, right?

I mean, when I was growing up, I would go to school in New York City, and I would not open my lunchbox if my mom had packed me Korean food. Because when I was growing up, I would get made fun of, really terribly. It didn't matter that I was probably eating something way more delicious than their ham and cheese sandwiches. It was foreign, and they would make fun of it, and they would make my life miserable.

Fast forward to when my kids went to school, and my daughter was, like, "Mom, can you pack me Korean food? Can you pack me kimbap?" which is the Korean rolls. "Can you pack me japchae?" which are the noodles. I was like, wow. It had changed. It had become more open and more accepting to eat different foods.

I mean, there's still stories of kids that get made fun of. But I think that the accepting of other people's culture through food is actually a wonderful way to learn about each other's culture, to empathize, and to really break down a lot of the barriers that can happen. I love that. So for me, I'm always going to talk about food because I think of it as another way of sharing my culture and also connecting people through the beauty of food.

DR. DANA: We Need Diverse Books was such a huge movement in the children's literature industry. You are one of its founding members. Can you tell us more about how it started and what it was like to be an integral part to this industry-changing initiative?

ELLEN OH: OK. Well, this is going to be a long answer. When people ask me about what I think about why We Need Diverse Books (WNDB) took off the way it did, I really think it was timing and luck. Because diversity has had lots of people advocating for it for a very long time, right? People have been really fighting for it. What made us different, really, was that, in 2014, social media had become a very prominent way of sharing communications, right? I don't think WNDB would have become the force that it did but for social media.

If we go back to 2014, there was a series of events. I was at a book festival with my good friends, Lamar Giles and Meg Medina. We had just done a panel that was not about diversity, but it was actually just about the craft of writing. It was just three authors of color. We were, like, wow, this should be the norm. We should be invited more to talk about our books and not about the lack of diversity. I was, like, "damn it, we need to do something about it! Are you guys in?" Lamar was, like, "hey, as long as it's not illegal, I'm in."

DR. DANA: Good answer. That's a good friend right there.

ELLEN OH: Exactly. Meg said, "of course. But what?" That *but what* was the question that kind of just sat in the back of my head. Then, not even a couple of weeks later was when Walter Dean Myers and Christopher Myers came out with those two op eds, "Where Are the People of Color in Children's Books," and then Chris Myers' article, "The Apartheid of Children's Literature." They were articles asking about what the message was when some children are not represented in children's books. Right? What is the message that you give to them? These essays were what we called, at that time, a call to arms. A demand for us to do something to make a change happen. He even said, Walter Dean Myers, at the end of his essay, he said "there's work to be done." Right?



Not even a month later, so I'm saying this chain of events, the timing of it, Bookcon announced their blockbuster, Kidlit Panel, that was entirely made up of white men. Then all the white women authors of Kidlit got really upset. All the BIPOC authors were, like, “welcome to our world.”

[LAUGHTER]

This is what we feel like on a regular basis. But then Bookcon compounds it all by announcing their 30 celebrity author line up, where the only diversity was The Grumpy Cat. For the first time, it was so blatantly obvious, right? Then we were just, like, look, here's our moment. Here's our moment, when all eyes are on this, where we can do something about it. That's how a group of us got together and made a hashtag. We went viral. Then we became a nonprofit later on.

Because I'm a lawyer by training, so I'm not going to just say something. I'm going to do something, right? To me, saying something is not very helpful. It's the action. I'm always about what are we going to do. What are the actionable items to actually make change happen? That's why we became a nonprofit. We raised a lot of money.

In 2014, the year we were formed, only 8% of children's books published that year were written by authors who are Black, Indigenous, people of color. Ten years later, now, those numbers have jumped to 45%. That's a five-fold increase. It's directly tied to our programming, our advocacy. While we want to celebrate those numbers, we can't. We can't celebrate them because we also, then, have to say all of the success in raising the profile of these marginalized books, that also, then, brought about this huge book ban. Right?

That started in 2022, where the book bans really started taking off. I mean, we recognize, we're painfully aware that the increasing rise in book bans, specifically targeting marginalized creators and their books, are because it's a response to the success that we had. We recognize that. So to echo the late Walter Dean Myers, there's still work to be done.

DR. DANA: I do want to thank you for what you have done and all the people before you who have all paved a path to make change. Yeah, there is still work to be done. But I do, in this moment, really do want to recognize you and your organization for letting everyone in, letting all

readers see themselves represented. Because we both know how important those books and those characters are to kids.

ELLEN OH: Especially the LGBTQ+ community, you know? When I think about the numbers there, they have the highest numbers of bullying, the highest numbers of suicide, the attempted suicide. They are the most vulnerable of our youth. They need these books. More than any other community, they need to see themselves, right, know that it's OK to be who they are. Then, also, they need everybody else to know that it's OK for them to be who they are.

So this backlash, the book banning that is happening, it's so painful. It's so hurtful. Because it's saying, these book bans are saying, you don't have a right to a happy ever after. You don't have a right to be seen in the books that we read. You don't have a right to live. I really just want to sit down and talk to these people and say, "when did your hatred, your prejudice, your bias become more important than the lives of children?"

DR. DANA: Or when did these children not become humans to you? Right? Because we are all human beings with our experiences. And to tell someone that that's not right or you're not human because of who you are, because of what you look like, because of where you came from, any of those things, to me, that's the greatest shock of them all.

ELLEN OH: That's why *We Need Diverse Books* is so important, why diversity is so important. Because books teach empathy. Books are our weapons against prejudice and hate. The fact that it's in children's literature is so important because a lot of times these kids, they don't see diversity, right? Sometimes the first diversity they see is in the pages of a book. That can be life changing, both from the marginalized community's viewpoint and from those who are not from that same background. It's both, right? They need to be seen by everybody. You need to be able to see yourself. You need to have everybody else see yourself, too.

DR. DANA: I agree. So many of your characters are writers and artists. They struggle with this and their parents' expectations of who they should be and what they should study in school. Did you ever face that pushback when you decided to pursue writing instead of lawyering? Do you have any words of advice for the young writers and artists and dreamers out there?

ELLEN OH: If you read my short story that's only in the paperback edition of *A Thousand Beginnings and Endings*, it's called "Carp, Calculus, and the Leap of Faith," then you know that

my mother forced me to be pre-med– [LAUGHTER] –for a long time. That story is literally as close as you can get to what really happened in my life. It was more memoir than fiction. Except in real life, it actually was worse.

Because my mom, after I told her I was dropping pre-med, she didn't talk to me for a year, and we lived in the same house. It was a difficult situation. Then I became a lawyer because I thought that my mom would be less angry. I thought she'd be less angry if I was a lawyer. Also, I was interested in it. I was watching a lot of *Law and Order*. I thought I wanted to be a prosecutor. But when I switched from being a lawyer to being a writer, she was really upset again. On a regular basis, she still will ask me when are you going to go back to being a lawyer. I'm, like, no, I'm quite happy. I'd seen my parents work hard their entire life. They were really unhappy their entire life. I wanted to be able to choose a career that I wanted.

I went into law thinking that was something that I really wanted to do. At first, it was. But then things change. I think that's the beauty of having an education is that you also have the ability to change careers, to decide whether or not a path is still for you. I have had the privilege and luxury to do that several times. I went into writing because it became something I was really passionate about. But I never thought I would be when I was younger. When I was younger, writing never crossed my mind.

So it was a passion that developed later in life. I think I would say to all the young people out there, don't be afraid to try things, right? If you have a passion, try for it, because you will never know if a dream can actually become a reality unless you try.

Also, there doesn't have to be only one dream. There can be many different ones. Life is like that. There are choices for you. There are careers and paths that you may have never thought of trying that suddenly open toward you and might actually provide you with the happiness that you didn't even think you were looking for.

DR. DANA: What are you working on now?

ELLEN OH: Well, right now I have a middle grade horror novel that I am finishing up the first draft on. It's due April 1. I have another WNDB anthology coming out in the fall, and that's all done. Then I will be, after April 1, I'm actually going straight into revision mode for the sequel to *The Colliding Worlds of Mina Lee*.

DR. DANA: Ellen Oh, thank you so much for coming on The BiblioFiles today.

ELLEN OH: Thank you. This was so much fun. Thank you for having me.

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