

Juliann Phan

Professor Corbett

ENGH 386

Major Paper #1: Final

Middle Ground



Figure 1: (photographed left to right) Jenny Nguyen, Juliann Phan and Lauren Parker.

I was sitting in between two different, yet similar peers. Jenny, the oldest of us three, greets you with a smile, bubbly laughter, a talker who blazes through topics quickly, later explains how her childhood framed her as a writer today. Lauren, the youngest, appears stoic, honest, a bit distracted, later proves how passionate and aware she is in her studies and interests, and how they are closely associated to her goals. In age, I am in the middle, but also in perspective as I get to know them. I begin to see parts of myself in my partners when they veer into discussing why they want to write. All three of us have the desire to write and impact the literary world effectively, while fulfilling our own individual goals.

JENNY



Figure 2: Jenny at age four.

Jenny is all smiles, with perfectly winged eyeliner and dresses in earth toned colors with a conservative and classic accent—similar to those sales associates I envy at J Crew. Jenny holds eye contact and her nods are agreeable, voice is weightless, her English is perfect—it’s hard to believe English is her second language, first being Vietnamese. She mentions, “I didn’t firmly grasp the language [English] until 1st grade.” Jenny was raised in the United States and learned English in at a rapid pace. In Mrs. Lowry’s 1st grade class, she started to read well and soon

learned her potential in writing. Her eyes widen often when she talks about her first time she pursued writing at a young age, she tells me, “we [the class] had a creative project where I wrote a script for a sock puppet play...in the end the whole class loved it, so did the teacher and she gave such great comments off of the script that it encouraged me to keep writing.” Since then, Jenny is invested in creative writing, writing novels and short stories.

Her mother bought her tons of books early on and modestly says “I read a lot as a kid so I guess from there it

[wanting to write] grew...I was my

own personal motivation, really.” Both Jenny and I have foreign mothers who bought us an overloaded amount of books and strived for us to be good readers at a young age, not knowing this would plant the seed to creativity and imagination.

We discuss her goal to write a young adult novel similar to John Greene’s *The Fault in Our Stars*. She interrupts politely saying, “I don’t want to just write a book, I want it to be important...to evoke some thought, it’s tricky

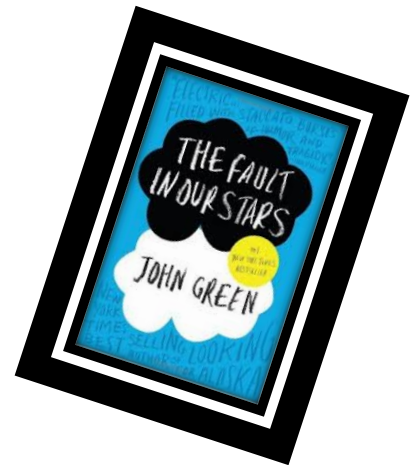


Figure 3: Jenny at the Nationals Stadium.

to be original. I want to write young adult novels... I really admire John Green, he's so popular!" I have heard mixed reviews on the novel, the adapted screenplay and John Green romanticizing depression and mental illnesses, so I ask Jenny for clarification. Jenny informs me, "*The Fault in Our Stars* definitely does not romanticize anything, it's [the novel] really stark and I really like the way he did it because it shows you the fault in the *characters*." Jenny defends Green because she respects his novels and how intelligent he is in conveying his message. Green's novel is trendy and a hot topic in the literary world so; I ask Jenny if she would ever want to write a book that becomes as popular as his. She shakes her head and tells me honestly she isn't aiming to write a book to become a trend then, smiles and laughs, "...but can *we* help it?!" Jenny has a valid point; producing a trendy novel invites a new audience and can be original.

The interview takes a turn as I ask the reason for her wanting to write. Jenny's hands have been reverently in her lap until I ask this question. She raises them and confesses, "I was an IT major before, for stability...then one day, it was weird, I had everyone I spoke to tell me to do what I want now and the job will come." I praise Jenny for her being able to let go of her IT major and the opinions of others, especially her parents. I can relate to Jenny on this level because, I too, have



Figure 4: Jenny walking to Corbett's class.

struggled with the thought of stability and a job after graduation. It's comforting to know I'm not alone in the process or thought. When I ask her how she felt after changing her major to English she described it as, "a burden being lifted."

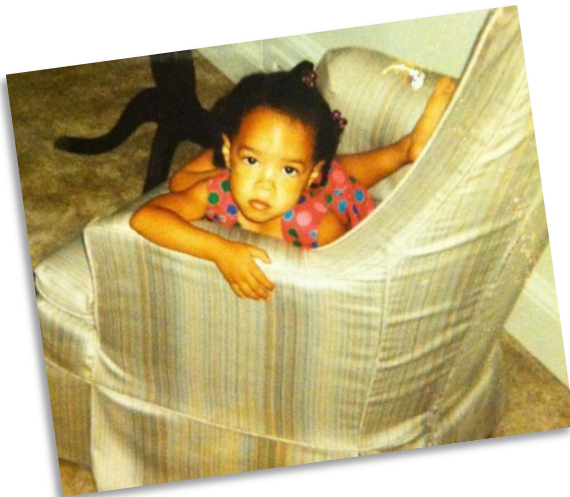


Figure 5: Lauren at age four.

LAUREN

Lauren, a Richmond native with black rimmed glasses is on her laptop for the duration of our interview and sometimes glances up for eye contact, but goes back to clicking at her keyboard or peeking at her iPhone light up from notifications. I'm not even slightly offended; rather, I prefer talking to someone with

the white noise of keyboard clicks. She feels like the best friend you've known for years, but you still don't know her favorite color. I simply ask what inspires her to write and Lauren responses nonchalantly, "Being black and queer *and* a woman."



Figure 6: Lauren performing at a slam poetry event, Slam Richmond (2011).

She makes the claim, “there are certain things in our [black women] reality that are not talked about and it’s certainly not talked about in our perspective.” She explains firstly, she did slam poetry, but stopped when she was seventeen. Lauren explains the negative part of the venues, “I’ve seen a lot of programs kinda exploit the youth by having a lot of fundraisers...you’ll have these really marginalized kids who are poor...and have them performing poems about their experiences to rich white guys who don’t really see *us* other than something to be

consumed.” I don’t know much about slam poetry or the

venues, so I listen onward to her steady voice, like a comfortable hum. Lauren is observant the way she describes the venues and mentors, explaining, “A lot of coaches use their students to kind boost their *own* resume...uses the kids as props and experiments.” The coaches are supposed to help the kids write and perform better, but Lauren tells me sometimes kids fall victim to not writing their own work. She seems bothered by this, but she remains steady in speech and sways back and forth in the swivel chair, armed propped on the side, no eye contact still.



Figure 7: First smile ever captured of Lauren

Without asking, she tells me her goal is to better the black queer and transgender community with her skills in reading and writing, saying, “Ultimately what I want to do is work with extracurricular literacy programs that are for youth of color...” she trails off and laughs saying, “I’m learning how to code...for these organizations for their websites”. She’s aware why these organizations fail, primarily due to funds and promotions, so she wants to not only do the behind the computer work, but also interact with students, so they don’t remain static in their character or writing. I understand Lauren’s frustrations, but even after the interview I feel as if I haven’t even scratched the surface. I understand her desire to helpful to a community—I am still learning how to contribute to a cause



Figure 8: Lauren walking to Corbett's class.

relatable to my interests. Lauren is doing the steps to achieve her goal by being in those scenes by tutoring in South East Washington, D.C. when she has time between classes, going back home to Richmond and learning how to code for websites, to put forth, "...a matter of professionalism..." into the extracurricular literacy programs.

While all three of us possess different interests and goals with how we want to affect the literary world, we all share a common factor. We are unapologetic with who we are and who we want to be in the literary world. I find middle ground with my partners with their views and where they are in their lives. We deny being another major, we are passionate, we are capable to shed light on issues we want to fix and come back together to sit in Row 1 of Corbett's class.



Figure 9: Row 1 Family