

Q&A With Ellen Oh

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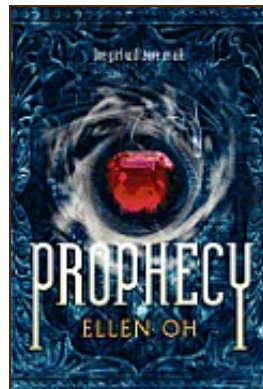
Ellen Oh, author of the acclaimed Prophecy trilogy—starring a third-century, yellow-eyed, teenage supergirl demon slayer—is channeling her own colorful fighting spirit. Two-thirds of her series, Prophecy and Warrior, are available now. King hits shelves this coming December.

In the meantime, Oh herself has gone all warrior as the founding president of the viral social media campaign, [#WeNeedDiverseBooks](#). She’s getting expert at practicing her own “kick-ass strong female” powers, even as she empowers others along the way.

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Terry Hong: When and how did the idea for your *Prophecy* Trilogy come to you?

Ellen Oh: Back in 2007, I was stuck in [Washington, DC] Beltway traffic staring at the unmoving bumper of the car in front of me when the idea hit: What if there is a legend about a great hero, and everyone thinks it is this young prince but then it turns out to be his despised girl cousin? I wrote the whole outline on little pieces of paper as I was stuck in traffic and ended up writing the whole book in five months. Of the three books [in the trilogy], *Prophecy* [the title of the first book, as well as the full series] was the one



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that came out so smoothly, so easily. It felt like it was meant to be told.

TH: Why did you choose to set your first novel in ancient Korea? As a fantasy writer, you pretty much have unlimited freedom as to where and when.

EO: I chose ancient Korea for two specific reasons: the first was just practical – I couldn't find anything like a fantasy adventure story set in ancient Korea in libraries or bookstores; the second was more personal – ancient Korea was such a fascinating, turbulent time with kingdoms changing, collapsing, being taken over, dealing with amazing politics and endless intrigue. But the specific moment I realized I had to write about ancient Korea was when I read a **Genghis Khan** biography and came to a point in the book when the Mongols invade Korea, and the entire royal court flees to Ganghwa Island (which is at the mouth of the Han River), where the Mongols aren't able to cross the river to get to them. The Korean leaders are out there laughing, while the poor peasants are getting raped and killed by the Mongols. And then the royals, who've been safe and sound in their island fortress, come back to tax the hell out of the surviving peasants and steal all their food. All those layered dynamics between the haves and have-nots were just so visual, interesting, and ultimately inspiring to me. That was feudal society at its best – from my perspective as someone who's interested in the history – and at its worst – from a human perspective because you really see the worst of what people in power do to their citizens. And through it all, the common peasants endure and survive.

TH: How much research did you do to write this series? And given the dearth of materials, how did you go about pursuing sources?

EO: When I first started the research, I could hardly find anything. I came across one general historical text in the library, but it didn't have much detail on the ancient kingdoms. My dad, who is also interested in ancient history, was incredibly helpful; he went to the Korean consulate office in New York City and was able to borrow a bunch of books there. Some were in Korean, so he sat with me and translated passages. I knew I still needed more, and I bought a lot of books off the internet. When I started teaching at George Mason University, I got access to all the interlibrary books – I was in heaven at that point, borrowing 10 to 20 books at a time, from art to archaeology, on anything that remotely touched upon that time period. Still, there wasn't a whole lot, and I had to piece together bits and pieces: I found information about pottery, for example, from one book, and then something about royal life in another, and that told me about how a palace meal might have been like at that time.

TH: So, third time's the charm, so to speak. Your third book (which turned out to be three books) finally got you published. And after 40 – not that anyone is

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counting, of course! But that's why we're here at *Bloom*. Do you think you could have written *Prophecy* when you were younger?

EO: I have no idea. I didn't give myself license to be creative until after I had kids. I think it was having my daughters that finally gave me a creative outlet. Before that I was just a really uptight, very factual, very rational lawyer. Now if I hadn't gone to law school? Maybe then I might have reached it earlier. I found being a lawyer made me very rigid and unimaginative.

TH: Let's backtrack a bit ... since *Prophecy* was your third book, what happened to #1 and #2? And can I ask what they were about?

EO: They're tucked away in my hard drive. My first ever novel was set in ancient Korea and was all about a murderous princess who then becomes queen of Japan. I loved that story but I was told that nobody would ever buy that book as my debut. So I started a World War II novel set in the Pacific theater. That book took me years and was the most difficult, painful thing I've ever written. Partly because of the subject matter, and partly because it was also the longest book ever. It was a draining experience.

TH: Have you shown those novels around for other opinions? Might they ever see the light of day?

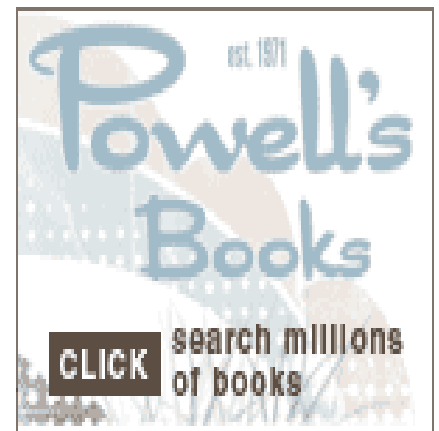
EO: Yeah, I shared them in writers' workshops with other authors. I actually shopped the World War II novel with agents, and realized it really needed a lot of work. I shelved it for the time being because *Prophecy* came to me so suddenly and quickly. *Prophecy* was so easy to write – so unlike the other two, which were like pulling teeth to set down. It was just the right idea that I was ready to write. The timing was perfect: maybe I had finally done enough research, and that all pulled together on its own in my head.

TH: And why did you choose to write *Prophecy* for a younger audience?

EO: I think because it is my favorite genre to read. Picture books, middle grade, young adult – I love them all. I write for younger audiences because you get to tell them stories without the bullshit. Children's books are storytelling at its finest. And that's what I love about it.

TH: Having young daughters, too, must have inspired you, too?

EO: When I started writing *Prophecy*, I wanted to make sure the book would be one that my girls could read. I wanted to create a heroine they could see themselves in, who would be a totally kick-ass strong female – that was most

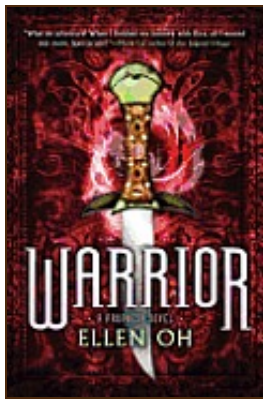


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key for me. With three daughters, I'm still regularly amazed at how much misogyny and racism there is in our world. I wanted my girls, and girls everywhere, to realize that they could be the heroes of their own stories. For me *Prophecy* is about girl power, and that is a message we need all of our children – regardless of gender – to learn at a young age.

TH: When you were writing the trilogy, were you ever concerned you might be accused of selling the exotic?



EO: Besides creating empowering stories to share with my daughters, another reason I wrote *Prophecy* was in hopes of broadening kids' minds to the idea that western history is not the only interesting history out there. But “exotic” is a term people like to use when describing something that is very different from their western cultural norm. I think the problem with the whole idea of “exoticism” is that it is very ‘other’-ing. Something is exotic because it’s different and not of their world. And they push it away. But most kids who read *Prophecy* and have written to me don’t

have that reaction. They don’t think, “Oh, how exotic!” What I hear from them is that *Prophecy* is exciting and adventurous and fun. I tell me they think it is a great action-packed adventure. A kid say my book was exotic. That’s gatekeeper co

TH: Which gives me the perfect segue way to ask about your involvement with the #WeNeedDiverseBooks campaign. What was the genesis of that?

EO: I can’t talk about the campaign without talking about earlier this year, my dad had a major stroke so sent my family to say our goodbyes. When he survived, we went home. Except, he can no longer walk, his speech is greatly impaired, and worst of all, he doesn’t remember who we are. I was overwhelmed by a feeling of helplessness because I couldn’t fix my father. And the help I could give felt useless.

It was in the midst of my personal despair that news about the [BookCon](#) “Blockbuster Reads” program hit Twitter and I remember talking to young adult author **Malinda Lo** about the continued lack of representation at these major book events. We kept talking about it and I began to feel a growing rage within me. And then something just snapped. I was just so angry and frustrated and feeling so helpless. I needed to do something. I needed to channel my rage into

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something positive. And I kept saying over and over again, “We need to do something really big. So big that no one can ignore us anymore.” There were quite a few people who scoffed at me, told me I was wasting my time. However, there were even more people who came to me and said, “What do you want to do? I’m in!”

I don’t think any of my team knows that when I was saying “Let’s do something big” I actually had no idea what I was talking about. But then I remembered being with my dad and how much he enjoyed seeing pictures of his grandchildren, even though he couldn’t remember their names. There is something so powerful about a picture. That’s when the idea came to me. I’d loved the cue card campaigns done for many social justice issues on Tumblr. What if we used the cards to let the people tell their story? Let them tell us why we need diverse books. When I explained my idea to my team, they loved it and we came up with #WeNeedDiverseBooks and a hashtag was born.

TH: Based on just the phenomenal media coverage alone, the campaign has been hugely successful – proof of its necessity! Were you and your cohorts surprised at how quickly it’s caught on? What have been some of the campaign’s pivotal moments?

EO: I don’t think any of us could have predicted the response we got. Nor could we have predicted how moved we’d be by the submissions.

“#WeNeedDiverseBooks because ...” let people tell us exactly how not having enough diversity affected their lives. From the queer girl who told us that she might not have tried to commit suicide if she’d seen someone like her reflected back in her books, to the young black boys who said, “I’m a superhero, too!” These were powerful stories that were even more meaningful when paired with the visual of a real-life human.

TH: What fabulous next plans have you cooked up to keep the momentum going?

EO: We are working on fundraising to help support some of our new initiatives like “Diversity in the Classroom,” which will bring diverse authors and books into the classrooms that need them the most. Not just Title 1 schools, but schools that need exposure to diversity. We are going to provide grants and awards for diverse authors and illustrators, as well as create a mentor program to help them with their publishing careers. But the most exciting news is our announcement of the development of the first ever Children’s Literature Diversity Festival, to be held in Washington, DC, in the summer of 2016. This will be a celebration of diverse authors and authors who write diversely. It will be a festival where every panel and every event will celebrate diversity in all of

its glory.

TH: How can readers get involved with #WNDB? What have you found to be the most effective ways readers can push for more diverse titles in their libraries, schools, bookstores?

EO: Well, there's this little fundraising campaign coming up soon... But really, I think just helping people realize that there are these fabulous books out there by diverse authors is a great starting place. And also challenging people to recognize their own internal biases – the biases that might cause them to ignore a book that is different. A child doesn't care if the story is about a white, black, or disabled character. It's usually the gatekeeper that inserts themselves at an early age into the reading tastes of the young. And we have to ask gatekeepers – from teachers, librarians, publishers, even parents – to recognize their own prejudices and to realize that diversity for all children is a good thing.

TH: Let's get back to the trilogy: how different was the *Warrior* debut last December from when *Prophecy* hit shelves? What have you learned from quickly morphing from debut novelist to experienced author?

EO: I don't know about experienced author! But the release of the second book was a lot less stressful because I didn't let the unknown bother me. Like if I'd get a bad trade review, or if my sales were bad, etc. I can only control a certain finite number of things. All else is not in my control, so why worry about it?

TH: Did your readers react differently from Book 1 to Book 2? What are some of your favorite reader responses? And maybe some of your not-so-favorite?

EO: Well, Book 2 ends with a cliffhanger – so I got a lot of “Why'd you do that to me?” emails and demands for Book 3 spoilers. I have to say I enjoyed these reactions immensely.

TH: And your daughters ... since, in essence, you wrote the series for them, what have their reactions been, two books later?

EO: My kids are my biggest supporters. Although, only the oldest has actually read all of my books. She's been a great help to me always. I credit her for a lot of the final changes that made it into all three books.

TH: Not to be one of your demanding readers (ahem), but might we get a wee little sneak peek at the final part of the trilogy?

EO: *King* will be out December 2014, and the biggest thing that happens I can't

tell you about because that would spoil everything. What I can tell you is that all-out war comes to the seven kingdoms, and the Demon Lord finally manifests himself and becomes the world's greatest threat.

TH: With the trilogy finished, what's next on the writing radar for you?

EO: I'm working on a Korean shaman ghost story that is so creepy that sometimes I scare myself as I'm writing it!



Terry Hong writes [BookDragon](#), a book blog for the [Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center](#).

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