

## 2016 Maryland State Level 3 Winning Letter by Lauralee An

Dear Rainbow Rowell,

Some puzzle pieces of life seem to fall into place just when you are looking for them. Some pieces can be tricky to fit, but others can have clear places. For me, just as I was looking for the puzzle piece of life known as identity, your book, *Eleanor and Park* fell into my hands.

It is a bit superficial, but the reason *Eleanor and Park* struck a chord with me is because Park is a half-Korean, half-white main character. And I am the half-Korean, half-white main character of my life. Normally, I wouldn't identify with a character just because of race or ethnicity, but when you grow up surrounded by people who are not biracial, and then you see someone who is, there is an understanding between the two of you. There are feelings only half-Asian children growing up experience. Like when you are surrounded by other full Korean people and they do not see you as Korean, or white people who see you as the Asian of the group. I experienced that all my life. I never quite belonged anywhere. So home became a place of sanctuary where my parents saw me as their daughter—not the “Asian one” or the “White one”. If you are wondering, my Dad is the Korean parent. He was born and raised in South Korea, but came to America after he graduated high school. Only at home, where I could be with my Mom and Dad, was where my heart was truly at peace.

Outside of home was a different story. As I grew up, I read more books, watched more movies, saw more television shows, and I realized something. Everyone in the media is one of the other. They are white or they are Indian, black or Asian, but never both. I thought this was just the way things were. That half-Asian people like me would never have any main role in the media because we can't play Asian stereotypes, or white stereotypes for that matter. So half-Asian people don't have a place in popular television shows or books. But then I stumbled upon your book in the bookstore. The spin read *Eleanor and Park* and when I wiggled the book out of the shelf and turned it over to see the cover, I knew. All Korean-Americans can tell Korean names from American ones, and Park is one of those names. And the cover art of a red-haired girl sitting next to a black-haired boy only solidified my assumptions: there was going to be a Korean main character. And my heart leaped. I didn't even know at first that Park was biracial, I was just ecstatic that a Korean-American was going to be something other than a sidekick or supporting cast.

Now, prior to reading your book, I often thought about what being biracial really meant. Was I more Korean than white? I certainly look it—I inherited many feature from my Dad so my appearance leans more towards my Asian side. But I don't speak Korean fluently, so does that mean I can never be accepted by Korean people? Do I need to be accepted? These thoughts bounced around inside of me on a daily basis, as if my brain was an endless maze and I was the only player, constantly trying to get to the center of it. Instead of achieving any goal, or coming to a conclusion I just went back and forth until some distraction popped up and whisked me away. My picture of identity was a smeared painting, with all the colors present and vibrant, but no distinguishable picture, enclosed by two mismatched frames. I was eager for some clarity. And that was when I read your book.

## 2016 Maryland State Level 3 Winning Letter by Lauralee An

Park wasn't a character whose sole purpose was to represent all Half-Asian teenagers in America. He was not some advocate for diversity. He was a person. He just also happened to be half-Korean. Eleanor asked Park once, "You're Korean?" To which Park replies, "Half" and when Eleanor said she didn't understand what that meant Park said he didn't either. Me neither. I don't know what it means to be "half". All I know is that's what I am—or rather, it's who I am.

But identity is complex. It is a crystal, bending and refracting light differently depending on who holds it up to the sun. Being half-Korean is just one refraction of who I am. Just one glimpse of myself. Your identity goes farther than what color your skin is, where you grew up, what language you speak. Identity is who you love, who you hate. What music plucks at your heartstrings, and what music tugs at them. Smells that could send you back to your best memories or darkest times. Identity is what you regret, and what you are proud of.

So that canvas full of vivid colors all blurred together, with the mismatched frame. It doesn't need clarity. At least not in the way I thought it did. I hoped one day it would just click, I would know exactly what it meant to be half-Korean. But, of course, that is not the answer I needed. That smeared painting only looks blurry because I'm looking through a tiny window at it. Once I realized that who I am is so much bigger than what my ethnicity is, I realized my painting is a work of art. It tells a story, and encompasses all of me, not just physical traits.

Rainbow, you tore me away from that tiny window; you let me see the whole picture. Being half-Korean is a part of me; Not all of me.

Sincerely,

Lauralee An