

The Asian Main Character

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Kent Ono, a professor who studies media representations of race at the University of Utah, stated in a *DW* interview that “Most images of Asians and Asian Americans on screen weren't created by Asians or Asian Americans. [This] creates a very confused and estranged relationship by Asians to Hollywood, because they can't fully identify with this bizarre representation of themselves.” Like Ono, I, too, struggle to identify with Hollywood’s representation of Asians, whether that be the stereotypes created or lack of representation on and off screen. When movies portray minorities in a negative or condescending light, many minorities turn to the pages of books as a place to find more realistic representation. They immerse themselves in stories inspired by their cultures and shared experiences that do not have a white actor portraying the Asian character. They read vivid words on the page where they are finally allowed to explore their heritage in an accepting and open space. I am one of these readers.

Being a second generation Filipino-American allowed me to learn the importance of my Filipino heritage through the teachings of my family, especially my grandparents who immigrated to the United States from the Philippines for graduate school. They instilled in me a deep love for my Filipino culture and a respect for the generations that came before me. Although I always grew up around positive Asian influences, I struggled to see this celebration in my life outside my home and in the movies I grew up watching. Whether surrounded by an

almost completely white student body in grade school or seeing the few movie leads that looked like me, I always felt this sense of a divide between my Asian culture at home and the Asian culture presented in my daily experiences. However, this divide lessened as I immersed myself in Asian focused books like *Shortstop from Tokyo* by Matt Christopher, *Farewell to Manzanar* by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, and *Crazy Rich Asians* by Kevin Kwan, which allowed me to celebrate and connect to Asian heritage myself.

Shortstop from Tokyo by Matt Christopher checked all the boxes for my fifth-grade self: Asian characters, a short story, and baseball! Matt Christopher became a staple in my reading repertoire, as I consumed these books quicker than my grandmother's eggrolls during Easter lunch. The books were quick reads and fulfilled my love of the game of baseball; however, *Shortstop from Tokyo* was the first of Christopher's books to truly resonate with me. Sam Suzuki was not just a background character that spoke two lines in a film or the Asian best friend with strict parents. I saw my Asian culture presented in a book with Sam as a main character and vital part of the Mohawks little league team. This book lit the spark in me to develop a more well-rounded book selection and challenged me to search for connections in the stories I read. It reassured me that I was not alone, and that there were Asian kids like me that loved baseball almost as much as I did. It drew back the curtains to a reality that Asian kids were more than just the nerd or karate kid that I had seen so many times in movies. *Shortstop from Tokyo* allowed me to see an Asian kid in the spotlight without the stereotypes attached. Although just the beginning of my experiences with Asian books, *Shortstop from Tokyo* allowed me to see my Asian culture presented in a positive light.

With my horizons expanded, I continued to read my way through seventh grade. By the time I picked up *Farewell to Manzanar* by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, I finished the curriculum staples of *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Jane Eyre*. After reading a great deal of classics, I switched things up and picked up a random book in my classroom library. A cover caught my eye with a lone Asian woman in the center, which intrigued me because it had been so long since I had seen an Asian main protagonist. While *Wuthering Heights* and *Anne of Green Gables* were great, I never truly saw myself in these books. This changed after I tore through the pages of *Farewell to Manzanar*, almost as vigorously as when my grandma whisks her signature leche flan. This story revolving around Jeanne's experiences in Japanese internment camps and the aftermath resulting from World War II captivated me. Although I could not fully relate to the horrors that the many Japanese Americans faced in these camps, knowing that I never learned this in school struck a chord with me. It bothered me that my American history class did not even mention it in the World War II unit. This harrowing story shocked me, but also inspired my own education regarding other nationalities, not just the food or traditions, but the history and stories behind the Asian population in the United States. *Farewell to Manzanar* sparked a fire in me to learn more about my own Filipino culture and the experiences of other Asians.

This passion and education regarding Asian culture through literature continued throughout my high school experience. I became more open about my heritage, and I loved giving numerous presentations on different aspects of Filipino tradition and history. This celebration culminated in my completion of the *Crazy Rich Asians* trilogy by Kevin Kwan. After being mesmerized and awestruck by the movie, I bought all three books to dive deeper into the complex plot and fantastical characters. I savored each chapter like I would savor the fresh

lechon made during the Labor Day Filipino picnics. The interwoven storylines and endless drama enthralled me, and I loved recognizing the subtle references and quirks that only Asians would truly understand. In the first novel, *Crazy Rich Asians*, I was elated to see such a wide variety of Asian cultures represented and uniquely celebrated rather than grouped into a single umbrella category. My love for the series immensely grew in *Rich People Problems* when the characters actually visited the Philippines and even mentioned the prominent Filipino Ayala family. This series fully showcased Asian culture in all its glory and brought me such joy and pride to experience an Asian narrative filled with all types of Asians of all backgrounds, written by an Asian, and consumed by people all across the globe. Its commercial success cemented my belief that a story revolving around Asians could reach any reader, regardless of their race, age, or sex. Overall, this book reaffirmed my Asian identity and helped me truly become proud of my heritage.

Each of these three books helped me with a distinct part of my Asian identity. Whether that be discovering it for myself in *Shortstop from Tokyo*, educating myself in *Farewell to Manzanar*, or celebrating my culture in *Crazy Rich Asians*, books allowed me to relate the characters portrayed. Books encouraged me and provided a safe space for exploration, learning, and development of my identity as an individual and as an Asian American. Although movies have taken steps to become more inclusive, including showcasing more positive minority representation, books have always stood by and supported me since my childhood. When I did not see myself accurately represented on screen, I turned to the pages for comfort, just like countless of other young Asian girls hoping to forge their own path as a strong Asian main character.