Transcription for Episode 96: Interview with Abigail Hing Wen

Episode Duration: 36:04

Jenn: Hello and welcome to the latest episode of the Minorities in Publishing podcast. This is Jenn. For new and returning listeners, you may know you could find the podcast at minoritiesinpublishing.tumblr.com, or on Twitter at @MinoritiesinPub, or you can sign up for the newsletter which is in the pinned tweet. We are on iTunes, TuneIn, iHeartRadio, Spotify, and Google Play. And in this new year we are recording before her book comes out. By the time this episode airs, Abigail Hing Wen's new book, her debut, *Loveboat, Taipei*, is gonna be out in the world. So welcome, Abigail, pre-publication.

Abigail: I am super excited to be here for this podcast, and I'm really excited and nervous for the book to come out. I think as I speak with more folks and more people who are starting to read the book, I'm definitely feeling really exposed. It's a good problem to have, but it's a little terrifying.

Jenn: I was thinking a little bit about that because there is this anticipation, and I've heard other authors, especially older authors, like I'm near 40, but I think it's definitely something different for everybody, obviously. But I wonder if, especially when you're older, when you have a family, when you've been living life in a specific way versus straight out of college, if you're in your twenties and whatnot, how you process that debut as, “Wow, this is actually going be out in the world. Who am I going to be talking to? What am I talking about? This seemed like a great idea Now maybe I should take it back.” If anything, that kind of comes into play, especially if you have a family and you have a career and all this stuff—careers outside of writing.

Abigail: Yes, it's a great question, and I'm actually glad you're asking because I definitely am processing a lot these days, and wow, everything is changing and changing really fast. So I think there's the balance part. My husband and I have always been pretty good about trading back and forth, picking up the slack when the other person's really busy. So we got married in 2001 and I dragged him to New York when I went to law school at Columbia, and then I dragged him back to DC when I got my clerkship on the D.C. circuit, and then he took me out to California to work in tech, and we've been here ever since. But during that period, he was, at times, traveling quite a bit, and so I would pick up the slack at home. I think we've always just shifted based on what our particular family needs were, so when our kids were younger, that's probably

also another reason we came to California. We needed to have more family around us to help support the work and raising the children. So now that my kids are older—they're 12 and 17—it actually feels like the right time to be leaning in more to my work and my writing and my career, and it's helping me to keep up with them. So I feel like I have more to offer them in terms of their own interests. As my older one is preparing to go to college, and the younger one, he's a composer and also a programmer. And so I just feel like all that's been good, and they're excited for the book and obviously have read it, and I enjoy talking about it with us and with their friends, too. So we're figuring it out day by day. I don't think it's really sunk in yet that I'm going to be gone for a whole month for tour, but I'm sure I'll be feeling that very soon.

Jenn: We're going to get into *Loveboat, Taipei*, but *Loveboat, Taipei*'s protagonist is Ever, Ever Wong, and she's a young woman. I don't want to say she's isolated, but at the same time, maybe she is isolated. She's going to Taipei, and she's going to school, and she's building up her own, I guess, morale in terms of who she is, what she wants, pursuing what she wants. And she's dealing with boys. So this is a romance. Would you call it a rom-com in a way? Like a romantic comedy? And boys factor into this. You're a mom of boys. Did that kind of help get into the ways you want to portray romance, especially Asian romance?

Abigail: I haven't really thought about whether it's my boys driving this desire, but I have a brother, I have Asian American guy friends, and through the years I've just heard a lot of the moaning about the portrayal of Asian American men in the media and entertainment. It's very rare, if any, that you see the Asian American guy kiss a girl on screen or get the girl, and I remember hearing my cousins one time when they're talking about Harry Potter and how Harry Potter doesn't end up with Cho Chang. "Oh, it was because she's Asian." They weren't being accusatory or anything, they had actually accepted it. It's like, that's why it is, right? And so I think that definitely was in the back of my mind and wanting to portray the reality of who Asian American men can be. That's kind of the hope in this book is a cast of over 30 different Asian American characters, and they're all different, and some are romantic and some are not. I think that wanting to see more of that even distribution or even representation of just who people are was really important to me.

Jenn: So the premise is, as mentioned, Ever, she's in the States. She's born in the States, accurate? She was born in the US?

Abigail: Right.

Jenn: She's an only child, She's one of the few Asians in her town. She's in the

Midwest, and she wants to be a dancer. Her parents want her to be a doctor. It's the push and pull of what's best for our child. “We came here.” Her parents did emigrate to the States, and they want the best for her. They worked so hard. So she's dealing with a lot of guilt and anger, too. And so they sent her to the school to learn Mandarin. That's when it kind of all blows up in a good and bad way, where Ever is on the loose, so to speak, and like you said, there are a lot of characters. There's a lot of internal discussions, and there's a lot of bringing up stereotypes, the concern about stereotypes. So when you take Ever out of the States, especially, where she does say she feels like she doesn't belong, yet she does belong, like especially if you look around and everyone looks like you. They have similar features. You are not sticking out the way she is back at home, at least physically. There seems to be something very purposeful in putting her in this world, and as author, was that kind of always the goal? “If I'm going to write this story, I want it to be Asian. They're going to be in an Asian country. They're not going to have to deal with being the minority. They're going to embrace who they are, what they love, and the readership is also going to see this.”

Abigail: So Loveboat is actually a real program in Taiwan that Asian Americans have been going to since the 1960s. Parents would send the kids for the language and culture and also to find a spouse, and that's how it got its nickname, Loveboat

Jenn: So they did send their kids there to party?

Abigail: Yes, to find a spouse. Taiwanese government also went through a list of all the major scholarships in high school, the presidential scholars, Cooke scholars, Westinghouse, and everyone with a Chinese last name would get this trip for free. And so that's how I ended up on the program, and so for me, I think it was more that I had never experienced that type of immersive environment where, yes, like suddenly your race is erased, and it's not something that stands out, it's not what makes you stand out. It's other things, it’s your personality, it's your interests, it’s the kind of friend that you are, those are the things that distinguish you from everyone around you, instead of your race dominating that. That was a really important experience for me, and I think I wanted to capture that in the book.

Jenn: So how do you create Ever? Because you've experienced Loveboat, like you said, so Ever is a contemporary character experience seeing something you experienced years ago. How do you transform that for a younger audience?

Abigail: I was about Ever’s age at the time that I went, and I initially actually wondered if I should set the book in the past, but I talked with a lot of young people, and I have a number of young cousins, and I found that it's still the same story, still the same types of

struggles with trying to figure out your identity between cultures, even though there are things that also changed. And it took me a while to figure out who's going to have to go on this journey, and that's partly why there's 30 characters. [laughter]

Jenn: I wasn't counting, but I was like, “Wow, there are.” Because there are 500 students.

Abigail: Yes, yes, and thousands of students have gone on this program, so I spent a long time just really distilling down the essence of what makes Loveboat unique, why it was so special. And it really came down to one thing, which is that it's a story of discovering identity in all its facets and not just in terms of your identity as a person between Chinese and American culture, but also how do you find the balance between pursuing what you love and honor your parents, and then also find out what kind of friend you are to people? what kind of girlfriend you are, what your values are. And so all that was captured not just in Ever, but in the students that she meets. So the other main characters are Rick Woo, who is the Yale-bound child prodigy, bane of resistance. Then there's Sophie Ha, who is going to Dartmouth but really is just there looking for her MRS. And then there’s Xavier, who is quite bright but doesn't seem to care about anything, and he's a player. And so you kind of put all these characters together and crazy things happen, but it did take me a while to hone in on Ever as the main character. And I think her experience parallels a lot of mine and trying to find my place between my love for dance and writing and the arts, but also my interests and my parents’ and community’s expectations that I would go into a professional pursuit, which I ended up doing in the law.

Jenn: Getting to that, the law, you do both. You're able to balance both, but for Ever, it seems like she has to make a choice. And I won't say how this ends and what the turnout is, but the presentation, especially from how you begin, I really like all the letters that she was receiving before we even meet Ever. We're just kind of experiencing that, “Oh, man, okay. There's a little hope. There's a little hope.” We don't know what she actually wants. We just see this kind of mix of the results of these applications. College applications, I should specify. And so for her, it does seem like that, and that's a journey she has to just figure out for herself because she's not an adult. She's not gonna be 30 at the end of this book. It doesn't all fix itself. But you are. You're our writer, and you are in your professional field as well. So how did that come about for you to realize I can do both, or I want to do both?

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Abigail: Yes, I would say that is going to be different, and everyone's going to find their

own balance. I would hear this advice from older women in the context of trying to figure out the balance between raising a family and your career, and I think that's true, too, for your pursuits of passion projects and arts and trying to figure out what is it that you wanted to do with your life and your time. So I think for me it's possible that at the time I was writing this novel I was more unsure that I wanted to stay in the law. I did love the writing, and it was really feeding me. I did love the balance I had working in venture capital as a lawyer because I was able to see the new technologies and start-ups, and they're also very entrepreneurial and creative but still have a lot of mental capacity for the writing itself. And when I got the book deal, a lot of people said, "Well, of course you're going to quit your job." I thought really hard about it. I came very close, but there's something that made me think that I couldn't quite do it. And I thought about why is that, and I think part of it is that I came to a place in my career where it was actually also very fulfilling, and I had a lot of responsibility, and I'm working in a field in artificial intelligence, which I think is going to make a really important impact on our future, and I want to stay involved in that world. I have some writings on the artificial intelligence nonfiction side. I've got some articles out with *Fortune* and *Forbes* magazine, but I've also been working on some fiction pieces for quite a few years. So now I'm starting to think about ways to bring together my interest in storytelling and artificial intelligence. I don't know what it's going to look like that. I feel like in some ways I've probably postponed the decision that Ever makes, and even now, I'm still in a wait and see mode in some ways but trying to figure out how I could bring it all together.

Jenn: And at some point you pursued an MFA.

Abigail: I did. Yeah, and I think the other big piece of advice I give people is that I did make some hard choices along the way to take a lesser track with my legal career. So I went in-house, which, at the time that I made the decision, was very difficult because people who were really hardcore were staying in law firms and going on to become leaders in a particular sector of law. I knew that it just wasn't for me, and so going in-house, it was an opportunity to have more capacity to write. But it did feel like I was stepping off a legal treadmill, and so I would say that those are some hard choices that Ever has to make, too, because we do have limited time as human beings and how much we could pursue it at one time. During that time, I was able to do a distance program to get my MFA, which was 10 days on campus twice a year. I used all my vacation time for that, and then I would do correspondence at night, 9 to 12. I would be writing and working on these packets that I would send to an adviser, who'd send them back with comments, and so that's why I grew as a writer over time. But it was a very, very slow track because I was also working full time, and I don't know that it's the right step for everybody, like I think some of my writer friends that have been able to write full time. They've been a lot more productive, for sure. They've produced many more books

already. And then my friends who have stayed full-time law are also producing articles and partners at law firms. I still don't know what I think the right answer is for me, but I'm actually feeling like I'm on the right path.

Jenn: Sometimes I actually think the word balance is not really fair nor accurate because it implies that everything kind of works out, like the scales never tipped further one way, never tip further the other. I think that's a constant thing as an artist, and the artists are workings—I don't want to say a “working” artist, but artists who do their artistry and also has another job that brings an income. It's more words, but maybe that's just more accurate to say, and it's always interesting for me to meet with, like you said, people who are full time and this is their job and they write and their books are coming out every year, and then those of us who are having another full time job, families, other responsibilities, all these other things, and writing these books, and maybe we're producing a book a year – doubtful, I don’t know. But it does seem like there's this comparison nowadays. It's 2020. It seems as though the consistency of comparison is something that teens especially have to deal with. I don't know that we had to deal with. I'm a child of the early eighties. I didn't have that consistency of comparison and looking at the screen, and it feels like that's definitely something that Ever and everyone at that school is dealing with, not just from their parents, but from the outside. Did you think that also contributed to something you wanted to explore, is the consistency of the external and the internal pressures that come with that?

Abigail: So I think you're really astute in identifying that there's a lot of factors, a lot of sources of pressure on these kids, and definitely there is a lot of comparison. And I think part of that journey that they all go through is to recognize that they're all on their own paths. I don't want to spoil things for the reader, but Ever ends up with some pretty unconventional choices in the end, and I think that would scare some people. But I think that's important to realize that we’ve got time to make choices that are good for you, even if they don't seem like what everyone else is doing. Similarly, I think Jenna is making a choice like that, which I think would scare a lot of people who have been on a track for so long. It's okay to take some time to just recover and think about what's good for you and what you need to be a strong human being.

Jenn: So when we get into the arts, that's something else that I noticed consistently came up. Ever and another character are dealing with parents who don't seem to respect the arts or don't see the arts as viable in terms of incomes, like “Why would you pursue this? Taking over my company obviously makes sense.” The law makes more sense. Medicine makes more sense, and it does feel generational, but it also feels very responsible. It makes sense. It absolutely makes sense. Well, yeah, we're always going to need lawyers. We will always need doctors. We will always need architects, these

kind of functional positions, and yet the arts is not seen as something that will sustain you in a certain way. And so you were mentioning toggling back and forth yourself with the law and the arts. Through Ever, did you just seem to explore that more, like how valuable the arts are, how fulfilling the arts can be, how important it is to let anyone explore this and absorb the beauty of the arts?

Abigail: Definitely. I think writing the book helped me realize how much I love to dance. Ever is a dancer, and it's definitely not something that ever occurred to me to pursue professionally, and I don't have Ever's dancing chops, so it's not even an option for me. But I think having that artistic input and having the ability to process and communicate without words is extremely important because it changes the way you think about the world and the people around you, especially in a field like mine where I'm working in artificial intelligence in the technology that's going to be helping shape decisions that impact a lot of people's lives, and it's a really important space to have diversity of thoughts. We want to have people programming that are not coming just from technical backgrounds but also from psychology and humanities and art and literature and representative of all of humanity. So I definitely think that the arts, in some ways, they're undervalued by Ever's family, yes, but in some ways, it's a privilege to be able to devote energy and time to art. And that's partly what Ever comes to in the end. Like her parents, yes, they've sacrificed a lot for her, but in some ways, they have so that she can pursue these things that make her happy and also help her to contribute better to society and doing her dance, she finds a way to make a contribution and support yourself through the art that I think her parents weren't necessarily familiar with, being recent immigrants to the country.

Jenn: Do you think there's also fear involved? I know for me, it was kind of, people encouraged me to go into business. I don't even know what that means. Oh, business means getting an MBA, make some money, and do all this stuff. I hate math. [laughter] So it's just not happening, but it also seems like there's just a fear that comes with the unknown. I mean, no industry is quantifiable, but the arts, especially this one, like, you have no idea what's going to happen. You don't know when your next paycheck is coming, but you love it, and that fear, I can totally relate to her parents here because I think that's part of why I work in publishing, which isn't as well paid an industry as medicine eventually gets to and law eventually gets to as well. But there's still the solidity to it that makes me feel better to be able to create as well. I think I was just raised with this.

Abigail: There's fear that's driving Ever's family and many others like them that don't value the arts, and I think that's a really insightful point. Ever's family came to the United States looking for a better life, and so they went through a lot. There's a lot of emotional

stress that comes with up-taking your entire family, going to another place. And then her father finds out he can't even practice medicine, so his very livelihood has been taken away from him, and he's had to scrounge around to find alternatives to support his wife and two daughters. And I think that does something to people. As I've grown up and growing older and even through the writing this book, I really have come to appreciate how much my parents have gone through, and also how amazing it is that they've gone to the place that they have go to, with economic stability, and they volunteer a lot of their free time now in the world of politics, and it's really a remarkable achievement that many immigrants have gone through. And so I think they're just coming out of a different world, and so for Ever to come to them and say, “I want to do this job that doesn't pay well,” and her parents just don't know what that world looks like. What does it mean to make a living in dance? So she has to do that work, she has to figure out, “Okay, how is it that I support myself as a dancer?” And she does figure that out, and that's actually really important. Something I told my own children, if they want to go into the arts is that they just need to know how to support themselves. And I think every writer, every musician, they find their way and how to do that, whether that’s splitting your time between a couple of jobs that can support you financially while you can do the art, or getting to a place where you can do that. But you know, it's still very difficult. I do think artists need to be paid more in general. That's probably one of those fundamental social problems that we haven't addressed or resolved yet. But you know, I think the great thing about living in the United States is that we do have these incredible opportunities to take on these leadership roles in things like the arts and media and entertainment where we can put up thought leadership and share our ideas in these really awesome unions.

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Jenn: Ever’s in the States not too long in this book, so most of it is overseas. Was there something refreshing in being able to write that? Because there's also the threat of consistently dealing with Ever being othered by keeping her in the States, especially since she is situated in a space where it is acknowledged pretty up front that she is one of very very few, and that she is even kind of is hesitant to be automatically coupled with the only other Asian person in this school because it just doesn't seem fair. But taking her to Loveboat, was there just kind of this relief of, “Okay, I don't have to deal with those American expectations of the Asian story or the Asian immigrant story”? Because there's the danger of that. There's the danger of someone who works in the publishing industry, people feeding to these stories that continually other everybody that is not white and straight and cis and abled and all that stuff. I understand it was an experience you had you wanted to investigate in fiction, but it also seemed like, “Oh this is a great way to not have to deal with this.”

Abigail: Exactly. I think the Loveboat experience is just such a uniquely Asian American experience, and that's really very rare that you're ever in a situation where you're not other, and I love that. It's such a unique one that I wanted to capture and try to find a way to share it out to other people. One of the girls on my HarperCollins team, Jane Lee, she told me when I first met her that she'd read it three times and had never felt so seen before. And that was very similar to my experience when I went on Loveboat again because there's a piece that's erased and other aspects of you can come out I do love that they have this weird experience of not being the only ones in a room, but at the same time, there was a reason we go through our life experiences, and Ever at the end also realizes, "I'm going back home now, and I'm going to stand out again. But maybe I was never meant to blend in." And that's kind of true for her. In some ways, growing up as an other has prepared her for that life.

Jenn: But they still do talk about stereotypes. There's a gang of boys who consistently are about the machismo, and it's not like they're toxic. They're not mean or anything like that, but their journey seems to be thwarting the emasculated Asian man.

Abigail: They are my favorite side characters even though they play a small role. They have their own arc in the story where they're taking back their own stereotypes, and I remember when I first met my agent, I was telling her how much I love them, and she said, "They're the Greek chorus, right?" That's it! That's exactly what they are: the Greek chorus. They come out, they speak their truth, and then they fade away into the background. Yes, I was excited for that opportunity to have these honest conversations about stereotypes because they're also part of the reality of experience of Asian Americans. They don't talk about it, and as you saw in the book, the first time the racism really comes up, they're all uncomfortable talking about it because nobody wants to bring up things that are painful or shameful. And sometimes when you experience racism, I think there's a part of the person experiencing that feels like is there something wrong with me, and there's some shame that comes with it. Like, "Why did I become the recipient of this slur or anger from somebody?" And I think it's really important for us to talk openly about these things and to realize there's nothing to be ashamed of, and it's important that they be addressed, so it can stop.

Jenn: There's a level of disassociation, I think. It seemed like that, when they were talking about it. Especially what they witnessed their parents go through and how there was anger and frustration that their parents were allowing it to happen. But no one said anything. People still went about their business as usual, and that seems dissociative to me. "I'm going to just not even be here. I'm not here. This is not happening." And it allows you to survive in a way. You just gotta keep going

Abigail: For better or worse, I think that's what a lot of people do because Ever describes that it's like an arrow out of nowhere, like you're going about your day, and suddenly there's this racist incident. And what do you do with that? You can't let that take you down for the rest of the day. You can't control other peoples' responses, but you can control your own. And so I think you're right, but there's also an aspect of, this stuff is happening, and it needs to be called out. So as I'm starting to go on my book tour, I've had an opportunity to hear stories from a lot of people who are sharing their own struggles. And so, one that really has stayed with me was an Asian American film producer who had created this amazing film, had won some awards actually, making significant traction, and she was not invited onto the stage for the photograph. And there were two problems with this. One is: nobody said anything. The cast was up there, her co-producer was there, and the person who was taking the picture. Nobody said anything. She was just sitting in the audience while everyone else was getting photographed on stage. And the second part that was problematic is that she herself did not say anything. And I think that's part of, again, going back to what you said about internal and external pressures. There is an external problem, but then there's also this internal problem, like, "Are we going to respond?" And so in a situation like that and in the future, she's going to say, "Hey, I produced this movie. I need to be on the stage for this photograph." Even though, as an Asian American female, she felt like that was really difficult for her to overcome that upbringing that she had, that she shouldn't be making trouble. She shouldn't be promoting herself. She should just do good work and be glad for the work itself, right? And those are all things that are really good in the culture, but sometimes when it hits other cultures, it does not work so well.

Jenn: You kind of learn— At least in my experience I feel like as a black woman in the States, born and raised, also it's very different when you're born and raised, and where you're born and raised, right? Born and raised in New York City versus me being born and raised in Indiana, for instance. Like in New York City, you have to make yourself known or else you will just be stomped on, and it's not because New Yorkers are horrible people, it's because we have stuff to do. It's just like: Do you need something? You need to say something. Fast, fast, fast, fast, fast. And what I witnessed, in the beginning, it seemed as though, especially as a teen, you don't make trouble because also in the educational space you are deemed problematic if you ask too many questions. And I see this carry on as an adult, where people get very annoyed when you ask too many questions; they feel emasculated. They feel dumb, even though you're not saying it in a way or you're not expressing it in a way that is, "Well, this is messed up." Or, "You're an idiot." Or, "This makes no sense." Or you're just saying, "I'm wondering about why that method is being chosen instead of this method?" and automatically, boom, blow up. And so I think I always anticipate the worst and steel

myself from it to expect something really bad, and, most times, that's not what happens, thankfully. But I can only imagine being someone like Ever, where the threat of something really bad is continually hovering over you through what your parents have been telling you. And you're the only ones there, so what is that like? For me, it's trying to understand why you would be so timid. I think that especially when you experience the way her parents are hard on her. They love her, but they're really hard on her. Really, *really* hard. And they are hovering parents, over her and Pearl. Reading a book like this, I'm just like, "Dang. Oof. That's rough."

Abigail: Definitely one of the challenges I faced when I first started writing this book was really conveying why is it that she had such a hard time pushing back against her parents. And that is what I think is what Megan, her best friend, does not understand either.

Jenn: Oh, absolutely not.

Abigail: Because Megan has a very open relationship with her parents. She does what she wants. Her parents support her. Ever has a really hard time conveying it to Meghan, too, what it means to let down your parents when they've sacrificed so much for you, and also how much honoring her parents is ingrained in her, and how much she wants to do it because she loved them, right? And so I think it does take her experience in Taiwan, going crazy all summer, to help her get over that. And it's funny, even though I wrote this book, it only took me until several months afterwards that I realized that was actually a huge benefit of this program for myself and other alum, but also for Ever and these characters, that they were able to rebel in a safe environment, when their culture did not necessarily want them to rebel. And now I'm meeting more alumni now as I go through this book tour, and I'm really impressed with how grounded they are in their identities because they have this experience of really embracing their cultures and who they were in all aspects of that, but also because we all got to experience what it was like to rebel, and that's what it takes to be a leader. You have to be willing to push against the status quo *and entrenchment and speak up against things that are not right. And having that experience, like sneaking out and thwarting authority, even though there are people I interviewed that were embarrassed about it, I actually think it's a good thing. It's a really good thing to have had that experience to know what the boundaries are, how far is going too far, but also that it's okay to rebel at times, and nothing actually bad happened, like something good happened.

Jenn: So this is a book that I would say is a little between PG-13 and R. It's not R, but it's a little above PG-13, can we say?

Abigail: Yeah, I've heard people say it's a little racy. At HarperCollins they put it at 13 plus. I've seen other reviews put it at 14 or 15 plus.

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Jenn: We won't get into the spoilers on that, but it's spicy. Let's just say it's a little spicy. So one of my last question is about the disability element that comes into play and this happens for a couple characters, so Ever is an observer in this regard. And so her sister, Pearl, another character and another character, depression comes into play, dyslexia comes into play. How did you go about wanting to put those elements in there? After a while, it feels like a polygon a romantic polygon between a few of the characters because it's not quite a triangle.

Abigail: I think part of this is, again, I wanted to showcase the diversity of the Asian American community, and this is a very real part of the Asian American community, and as it is in all communities, so depression is very real. Learning differences are very real, but I think you don't hear about those stories because of things like the model minority myth. You don't hear there's not attention paid to those issues. Rick Woo, on the surface, everything seems to be going for him, but there's other things going on beneath the surface that maybe he hasn't been vulnerable about because he can't be. It's not his story to share or maybe because his culture or his upbringing doesn't really allow him to share these things, so I think in some way, talking about racism, it's always felt like a shameful thing. Sometimes talking about learning differences and depression and mental health also is taboo. Part of the hope in showcasing these characters that are also lovable in their own ways, that are struggling with these issues, is to show that it's okay. These characters are brilliant and amazing in their own ways, and they also struggle with other things that the community may not necessarily I want to talk about.

Jenn: So when you implement those elements of disability within the characters presented within the book, were you working with other people, getting beta readers and sensitivity readers?

Abigail: Absolutely. I had several sensitivity readers, reading especially for those I spoke with at length, with people that were trained in the area. And then I have my own experiences myself. So, yeah, and I don't think these are really difficult things to get right. I don't think anyone ever gets them right, but I think the hope is to just put it on the table for dialogue and conversation and an open manner. I have a couple panels coming up actually on mental health, I'll be with the American Library Association in January on a panel to talk about this very thing, so I'm excited for the opportunities of the book is opening up, even to have these conversations.

Jenn: So it is going to be out, and there are some nerves. But ultimately is it the book you envisioned at the end of the day? I saw you got your copies. Is *Loveboat, Taipei* everything you kind of wanted it to be?

Abigail: You know, I think it's bigger than I thought it would be. I just I'm so thrilled. Harper has been incredible. They really were committed to getting all the details right. The readers can't see this, but if they get a copy of the book, they'll be able to see that every chapter has this character that means love in a shadow behind the number. Just little details like that have really made it an immersive experience. The girl on the cover, they were really committed to getting her right, making sure she was authentic. And then for the audiobook, they wanted to know how to pronounce certain words, so there's an Aboriginal character, and they sent me a note saying, "How do we pronounce this character's name accurately?" And so I actually sent it out to my Taiwanese American friends, who sent it to their parents, who sent it to other people until somebody came back with a voice recording of how to pronounce this girl's name accurately. And I was so impressed with how important that was to them because it's really important to us, and also it's really important to have this girl's name pronounced correctly. And I love hearing what resonates with people, you know. The things that I didn't realize would resonate with people, some of my girlfriends who have struggled their careers. They love how Sophie gets to this point where Ever says to her... (this may be a spoiler – people cover their ears!) But she says, "You're smarter than 99% of the planet. Why don't you go out and make your own money instead of trying to marry rich, right?" And in some ways even that seems so obvious. It wasn't obvious for the character until it was said. It's not obvious for a lot of my girlfriends. So I think all that's been really encouraging just to see what people are taking away from the book, and they really do make it their own. It's out of my hands in a lot of ways, and I'm just grateful to be catalyzing these types of conversations.

Jenn: Thank you so much, Abigail, for talking to me about this book, your debut. It's so huge. Debuts. It's big time. Congratulations!

Abigail: Thank you! Thank you so much for taking the time. I really appreciate it.

Jenn: How may people reach out to you and connect with you? And learn more about *Loveboat, Taipei* and where you're going because you said you're gonna be touring for a month.

Abigail: Right. My website is www.abigailhingwen.com and all my tour dates and locations are there. So I'll be in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Portland, Dallas, Seattle,

Denver, Baltimore, Washington D.C., New York. There's more cities that are being added, so New York and D.C. are not yet on my website, but they're coming.

Jenn: Is this all in one chunk of the month or spread out?

Abigail: I will probably get to come home in between tour stops. Not every tour stop, so I'm going on a couple of week-long things, and then I'll come back on the weekends. Yeah, it'll be pretty intense, and I'm looking forward to connecting with a lot of people.

Jenn: Are you gonna go to Taiwan, do you think?

Abigail: I hope so. I was there for research a couple years ago, and I'm writing the sequel now, so I would love to actually go and just be re-immersed in Taipei and get to see things, so that would be really fun.

Jenn: Oh, snap, sequel. You heard it here. [laughter] There is a sequel to *Loveboat, Taipei*.

Abigail: Working on it. Hopefully. I did have a two-book deal. The first book is a standalone, as you can see, but the second book continues the journey of some of the characters that people were excited about finding out more, what happens to them. Well, thank you again. I really appreciate your time.

Jenn: Thank you, and thanks everyone for listening. Once again, this has been the Minorities in Publishing podcast, which you can find at minoritiesinpublishing.tumblr.com and on TuneIn, Google Play, iTunes iHeartRadio, Spotify, and on Twitter at @minoritiesinpub Thanks so much, and take care.

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