

Q&A with Hannah Bae

2020 Rona Jaffe Foundation Writer's Award Winner

Who or what has been the greatest influence on your work and in your life?

Moving to Seoul, South Korea, as a young adult changed the whole trajectory of my life. Before that move, I never felt connected to my heritage as a Korean American. I saw myself as a white person living in a Korean person's body. But the years that I spent living in Seoul, building a community of friends who shared my roots, showed me how deeply I could be connected to a place and a community that I could claim as my own.

What book have you read this past year that really surprised you—stretched you in some way?

I interviewed E. J. Koh earlier this year to discuss her memoir, *The Magical Language of Others*. I told her that I felt her book paved the way forward for me because of the way that she was able to bring together her personal history with that of generations past in South Korea and Japan. E. J.'s memoir is also one of the very few stories that addresses family separation among Asian Americans, and I loved how its use of three languages, English, Korean and Japanese, allowed me to flex my muscles as a reader.

Who is one of your favorite characters in literature and why?

I have always seen a lot of myself in Ramona Quimby from Beverly Cleary's books. I recently bought myself vintage editions of all of the Ramona books, and her high spirits and her unabashed expressions of anger, joy and love still move me. Ramona means so much to me, I even named my dog after her!

In addition to writing and literature, what else informs your days?

I feel so grateful for my little family: my husband, Adam, and our dog, Ramona. Even before the pandemic, we spent most days together at home. Adam is, in many ways, my artistic partner as well as my life partner. He is the person who encouraged me to pursue a creative path. While my memoir is solely my own project, I collaborate with Adam on food writing and illustrations, which we share on our website, EatDrinkDraw.com. Ramona is our endless source of joy, who is the reason why we wake up early every morning, go on long walks in the park, and go to bed at a reasonable hour every night. She brings so much balance and delight to our lives.

What has been your greatest challenge so far as a writer?

Publishing has traditionally been an opaque industry, and for a long time I had no idea how an outsider was supposed to break in. I've been lucky to find mentors, colleagues and organizations – like the Asian American Writers' Workshop, Catapult and Slice Literary – that have worked hard to open doors and make connections for writers of diverse backgrounds.

What project(s) do you hope to work on with the help of your Writers' Award?

I plan to use the Writers' Award to work on my memoir, which is tentatively titled *Way Enough*. It's the story of how mental illness and the stigmas that surround it led to my eventual estrangement from my family. Over the course of my memoir, as I learn to create physical and emotional distance from my family, I find myself drawing closer to our roots in South Korea.

Celebrated novelist Rona Jaffe (1931-2005) established The Rona Jaffe Foundation Writers' Awards in 1995. The program identifies and supports women writers of unusual talent and promise in the early stages of their writing careers. The Foundation has awarded grants to 164 outstanding emerging women writers. www.ronajaffefoundation.org