

7.13 The Importance of Black and Asian Solidarity with Joann...

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SPEAKERS

Jasmine Bradshaw, Joanna Ho

- J** Jasmine Bradshaw 00:00

You're listening to the First Name Basis Podcast, Season Seven, Episode 13. "The Importance of Black and Asian Solidarity" with New York Times bestselling author Joanna Ho.
- J** Jasmine Bradshaw 00:17

Teaching our children to be inclusive and anti-racist starts with us within the sacred walls of our home. First Name Basis is designed to empower you with the confidence you need to be a leader in your family and a change maker in your community. Together we will wrestle with hard questions and use the answers to create the world we want, a world that reflects our values of inclusion, compassion, and courage. I'm your host, Jasmine Bradshaw, and I am so excited to be on this journey with you.
- J** Jasmine Bradshaw 00:53

Hello, First Name Basis fam. I am so glad you are here. I have been hyping up this interview for good reason because today we are going to hear from the New York Times bestselling author Joanna Ho, who is just a beautiful human with a heart of gold. You probably know her from her debut picture book, "Eyes That Kiss in the Corners." It was an instant New York Times bestseller. And she wrote another book called "Eyes That Speak to the Stars" that was also a New York Times bestseller. She's absolutely brilliant. And one of the ways that she does her anti-racist activism is through writing books. And not only picture books, which " she has another one coming out in March called "One Day" that you can preorder now, I will put the link in the show notes " but also, she just wrote a young adult novel, it's called "The Silence That Binds Us," and it is absolutely, I don't know, it's probably one of my very favorite books I've ever read. It was so real, y'all, it was so real. It was so deep. And the way that I was able to connect with the characters and see myself in the book was really, really powerful to me.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 02:02

So today, Joanna is here to talk to us all about the process of writing this powerful book that really reflects so many of our experiences. And she digs into the importance of Black and Asian solidarity, and how critical it is that we're leaning on each other and saying no to white supremacy culture, so that we can work towards liberation together. If you're not someone who identifies as Black or Asian, I still think you'll learn so much from this interview, because liberation is going to be achieved when we are all working together in community, and Joanna Ho believes that and she teaches it to us today.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 02:39

Now I want to read you the synopsis of her book, "The Silence That Binds Us," because every time I interview an author, and I try to summarize the book, I let my husband listen to my summary. And he's like, "You give so much away. Like you basically told the entire book," and I was like, "Okay, okay, let me just read the synopsis so that everybody knows where we're starting at, and then I don't have to, like, give away the ending or anything too wild." Okay, before I read the synopsis. And even before we jump into the interview, I need to give a trigger warning because the book goes deep on really important topics, including mental health, and suicide, and racism. So those are all really heavy things that we are carrying together. And I totally understand if today is not the day for you. But I hope you'll come back and listen another time because it is a really, really powerful interview and a powerful powerful book. Okay, so, "The Silence That Binds Us."

J Jasmine Bradshaw 03:36

Maybelline Chen isn't the Chinese-Taiwanese-American daughter her mother expects her to be. May prefers hoodies over dresses and wants to become a writer. When asked, her mom can't come up with one specific reason for why she's proud of her only daughter. May's beloved brother, Danny, on the other hand, has just been admitted to Princeton, but Danny secretly struggles with depression, and when he dies by suicide, May's world is shattered. In the aftermath, racist accusations are hurled against May's parents for putting too much quote unquote "pressure" on him. May's father tells her to keep her head down. Instead, May challenges these ugly stereotypes through her writing. Yet the consequences of speaking out run much deeper than anyone could foresee. Who gets to tell our stories and who gets silenced? It's up to May to take back the narrative."

J Jasmine Bradshaw 04:29

Okay, like, come on. Do you not want to just pick up this book right now? It's so good, y'all. Okay, I'm going to let you in on the interview. The only thing I want to tell you first is that next Tuesday, we are having a Policy Party. So Policy Parties are where we get together virtually as a community and we talk all about the policies that are affecting marginalized communities. And this Policy Party I'm so so excited because I actually asked my friend Lindsay Dusard, we've been friends for, oh my gosh, years...since I was 10? We were neighbors growing up and we have just gone on to be really passionate about serving in our communities. And so Lindsay

is going to come and talk to us about being an ally to the refugee community. And she's worked in refugee resettlement for over eight years now. And she's actually pursuing her PhD at the University of Pennsylvania. And her work focuses on understanding factors related to refugee and immigrant students' sense of belonging, wellbeing, and success. So I'm sure you all have seen so much going on in our world right now and honestly, forever, that is directly impacting the refugee community. And so we're going to have this Policy Party to explore what it looks like to be allies to the community, and how we can really come alongside them, support them in this transition that they're going through, and learn from them. So I hope that you'll join us at our Policy Party, if you want more information, just go to [first name basis.org/policyparty](https://firstnamebasis.org/policyparty). And if you're listening to this after the fact, don't worry, we always share the replay. So you can just go to that same link. I'll leave it in the show notes. And you can catch the replay there. And remember, if you are a member of our Patreon community, you already have access to all of the Policy Parties. So you don't have to do anything except check your Patreon account for the link to join us. So if you're interested, all the information will be in the show notes as well as all over our Instagram. All right, y'all. Here she is. New York Times bestselling author, Joanna Ho.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 06:32
All right. Hi, Joanna. Welcome. Diversity. VSAs.

J Joanna Ho 06:35
Hi, it's so nice to be here with you. I can't

J Jasmine Bradshaw 06:39
believe I'm sitting with a New York Times bestselling author. Oh my gosh, congratulations.

J Joanna Ho 06:44
Thank you. I know it's so wild. I can't believe it myself.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 06:50
I totally can. Okay, so "The Silence That Binds Us," "â€" I already told you before we started recording "â€" sobbed. Sobbed! I mean in good, like in the best way, in the very best way. So I cried my eyes out throughout the whole thing. I thought, "Oh, I'll just like cry at the end." No. Me crying throughout. Oh, my gosh. And so obviously, I just have so many questions about the book. But one of the things that stuck out to me was actually at the very end, the author's note where you said, you talk you were talking about how you started writing the book, even before you knew that anti-Asian hate would be the centerpiece of social justice conversation, you talked about how you never expected that. So I really am wondering about your process of writing. Just what is your process of as an author from like, zeroing in on a topic to tapping into such deep emotions. Just tell us a little bit about that.

J

Joanna Ho 07:45

I have always been really passionate about anti-racism and like social justice work, about equity work. That's really why I went into education. I did, you know, a lot of like, professional development in my schools about restorative justice, about racism, you know, and anti-racist practices as educators. And so I wanted to, so for the longest time, I always told myself, like, I could never write a novel, I couldn't string together that many characters and build that much backstory and like, I will stick with picture books. And then I read Angie Thomas's "The Hate You Give," And I just I think in my head novels were fantasy, I love reading fantasy. And I just was like, there's no way I can make up worlds about trolls, and like the fairies, and have it makes sense. You know, it's like, I love reading it. I don't think my brain can do it. But I know as soon as they see that sidenote, like, I'm going to have an idea and be like, dang, I'm gonna have to try it, which is what I think happened here, like I read it, and I was, like, "Yes, this." This is, if I ever wrote a novel, I would want to write something powerful in this way that discusses racism, because that has, you know, up and for so long has been really like a passion point for me. It's really been like a driving umbrella of like many of the decisions and decisions I've made in my life in terms of wanting to dismantle systemic racism and systems. And so after I read that book, it was sort of this moment where I was like, "Oh, I want to write a book like this." And I want to write a book that really explores anti-Asian racism. It's not, it's something that I've experienced. It's something that is very, very real. It is something that nobody believes is real. Nobody ever talks about it. How can I write a story like that?

J

Joanna Ho 09:31

And so that was in the summer. I remember it was the summer after my daughter was born. So that was in 2017. And, you know, at the time, I don't think I even had a book deal. Yeah, I can't remember like, everything gets messed up in my brain, but I definitely had books on submission "no, I had just signed with my agent. And so I definitely, it was like another year-and-a-half until I had my first book deal. And I just knew that this was like something I wanted to explore. And so from a topic perspective, I was, you know, really asking myself like, "Okay, like, for me personally, what is like a story of my heart?" What, the Asian American, the Asian experience in America is very vast. It's very diverse. I am one tiny sliver of like, I can't even begin to pretend to try to represent everyone. So what is the story of my heart in which ways has it really played out? And, and you know, as you know, the story explores the suicide epidemic, or, and it sort of has that as the backdrop. And that's something that happened in my high school a few years after I graduated. And so that was something that's super personal to me, something very close to home. And so that's sort of where the story started. I don't even like, so in terms of, I think, like, when I started, I wanted to write something that would be like an, it would be eye opening. That would be a discussion starter. I didn't know how many people would read it. Because, you know, part of the conversation about the Asian experience is about being gaslit and about being made invisible. And so I didn't know Atlanta was going to happen, I didn't know the pandemic was coming. But all of those things aside, like the history of generations, and hundreds of years of anti-Asian racism is woven into, like our society the same way, and "I don't want to say the same way. But in terms of like, it's woven into the structures and systems. And so while it's awesome that we're talking about it, the reasons we're talking about it, you know, it's not awesome, like, why does it always have to be death? And like, deep tragedy, that force us into these conversations to have these eye-opening things where people have been doing the work, and nobody's been listening? But in terms of your

question, you know, like, those things have always been real. We've just never talked about them. And so now, it's nice that there is at least, like there's a #southasianhate, you know, like, things like that. But when I wrote the book, none of that existed, but it was still timely, because it's always part of the Asian experience in America.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 12:07

Yes. And, yeah, I know that you kind of compared anti-Asian racism and anti-Black racism. And I know that those things aren't comparable, but I also feel like, I feel it in my bones, what you're saying. Like, I had a few people say to me, like, "Oh, you're so lucky that you like blew up after George Floyd was murdered." And I'm like, do you hear yourself? Like, first of all, I was speaking into the void. No one was listening. That's why I'm, quote unquote, "so lucky" is because all that stuff was already there, because I was already doing this. So yeah, like, I totally feel like I can relate on some level to that feeling of like, "Hello! This is so important!" and nobody's paying attention, then all of a sudden, everybody is so

J Joanna Ho 12:49

Right. Yeah. And then how long does that attention last? You know? Yeah, that's I know, that's a whole other conversation. But like, it's like trendy and then, and that's the other thing that's tricky, is I think I wrote this in the author's note, too, is like, well, now that this is a topic of conversation, I'm very aware that that's temporary. That's very fleeting. But like, this history continues until it changes, and right now it's continuing, you know. But like in terms of what people are talking about in public, that just that's like this. Yeah, because then it changes and people get tired. Yeah, I want to talk about something else.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 13:26

Yes, definitely. Definitely. Okay, let's talk about the characters a little bit. Because, well, I have two questions about the characters. First, I want to talk about the name Maybelline because I thought it was so cute and funny. But then I was also wondering, is there a significance behind the name May, because you know, in "Turning Red," her name is also May. And so I was wondering, is that like, a name that is there a meaning or something really significant about the name May?

J Joanna Ho 13:55

I don't think so. I think it's like, oh, this is a Chinese sounding name that American people who speak English can say out loud, but I, like I saw that. I was like, "Freak! Everyone's naming their characters May!" I thought I was so creative. And apparently I wasn't.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 14:10

Oh that's so funny. No, I was just curious because I thought, oh, maybe there's some, like deep connection that I don't know about. Yeah. So. Oh, that's so funny. Okay, well, my other question about characters is do you see yourself in any of the characters like which ones, really do you

about characters is do you see yourself in any of the characters like which ones, really do you feel like you're most like, if any, because I was reading it, and I read, you know, Tia's character, and I was like, "That's me. This is me."

J Jasmine Bradshaw 14:32

J Joanna Ho 14:33
I want to hear why.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 14:34

Well, yes, I have. I was gonna say I have to commend you for doing such a good job with her, like developing her character and I could tell it was so like culturally competent, even when they were like singing the happy birthday song to Maybelline and they're like singing the Stevie Wonder version of Happy Birthday. I'm like, this is such a black thing in this book, and I'm so happy. But just the way that she feels so much pressure from her Caribbean immigrant parents. My dad is second generation. So my grandparents came here, immigrated here from the Bahamas. And so so much of the way that her parents interacted with her and talked to her and like the first of all the fact that her mom is so obsessed with food and always feeding people, like that is my dad. You walk in the house and he's like, "Are you hungry? Here's this feast that I prepared." And it's all like perfectly deliciously cooked and, and that is his love language. And I saw something on Tik Tok the other day that was like, the love language of Caribbean parents is like a huge plate of cut up fruit. And I was like, yeah. So yes, I felt like that in her family dynamic. And also her feeling like she has this really close friend in May, but also feeling like, "Should I talk to her about these things that she clearly is uncomfortable about? Like, I love this friend so much. And I really want a deep connection with her, but I don't want to ruin it by like, ruin it, quote, unquote, you know, by like bringing up things that are so heavy." And I just like I have, you know, friends like that. And, and I loved when you know, another character said to May like, "Hey, you need to open up this line of communication if you really are best friends." And so just the way that she's like, unabashedly organizing things, but also somehow has friends who she doesn't talk to about it. I was like, "This is my life," even though she's a high schooler.

J Joanna Ho 16:24

They love that so much. I feel like I think all the different characters are certainly pulled...like Tia, for example. She is a lot, one of my really close friends from college who and we were in the same dance group together. We met in freshman year biology. And we're in this like African German dance group, and her family is Haitian. And I actually just visited her a couple of weeks ago. And you know, so she was really helpful in terms of Haitian, the what would they do, what would they say, but like, so much of our bonding was over some like feeding, we would like we would call ourselves the old fat men in little people bodies in college, because we would always go after dance class and we just sit in the dining hall and just eat an obscene amount of food. She's like an emergency room doctor now. And she's just like, brilliant. So Tia, I feel like is a lot

based on my relationship with my friend. But also she's a mash of like, so many of I just feel like my life has been very blessed with like, incredible friendships. And so Tia is sort of a mishmash of all of those things. Like the texting is sort of like me and my cousin and the way we sometimes text.

J Joanna Ho 17:33

And in terms of I think, I definitely like parts of myself are in May. Like she loves to dance, there's a naivete. When, when I first really became aware of racial injustice, was this sort of like a, I think, you know, assuming best intentions of all people thinking, "If everyone just knew we would change it." You know, and then really coming to learn, no, it really is as insidious as it seems. There are things that are different, you know, like the way the way that May come so learn about it is really different than me. And there are ways that I think she's hesitant to speak out that, you know, I think I probably am sometimes still but like, you know, I think the relationships that she has with her family, sometimes are based on ones I have with mine, but sometimes are also based on ones, the dream version. The relationship I wish I had. So I didn't base, I don't think, any particular character on myself, but I think there's absolutely parts of myself in probably all the different characters, or people that I know.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 18:38

Yeah, yeah. Oh, I love that. I feel so lucky that I get to ask you these questions. Like, I'm thinking of all the people reading the book. And like, I was hoping to be able to ask you the things that hopefully other people are thinking as well. Speaking of, let's talk about the setting. So much of it happens at school, in high school. And as someone who experienced really hard, really scarring racist things in high school, I just felt like it couldn't be more perfect. Thank you. It's one of those things that made me realize like, you can't escape this, you know. So I was really grateful that it set in a school and I'm, I'm wondering, why did you choose high school? Like, why did you feel like that was the right setting?

J Joanna Ho 19:22

Yeah, I think partially because I was writing a young adult novel. So high school makes sense. But I you know, I think that, and because that's also the the setting where students in my own community or my own high school community, took their lives by suicide. And that was the catalyst of a lot of conversation. I mean, in the community where I went to high school, there were two suicide clusters and in the nation, there are maybe four or five in the year, a cluster, and so to have two within like several years of each other is just like, there's something happening in this community. And people, they sent in like teams of psychiatrists and mental health experts. And, and within those conversations just came so much very overt anti-Asian racism, and also a lot of like, okay, we have the conversation, everyone leaves and someone stays behind and then whispers to the interviewer, "Well, actually, this is the reason it's because of the Asian people in the community, yada yada yada." And so it feels like high school, for me also was the point of my own racial awakening. And so I feel like high school students are, so they're so insightful. They're so wise, they see everything. They know what their teachers are wearing. They know if their teachers are wearing the same pants, like twice a week. But they also like, they understand, they so know so much about what's happening in the

world. They don't always have the language, but they like understand it. But they're also so unafraid. They have so much hope for the future, they have so much. And so there's like, I love I personally love I mean, I love high school students. I have worked in high schools, you know, as an educator, always, and so I feel like high schoolers are my sweet spot in terms of like age groups. And they're funny, and they're irreverent, but they're also so thoughtful and compassionate and, and so there's a spot where they're still kids, but they're growing. But there's, you can still involve the community because this is very much like a community issue. It's a systemic issue. And so I think that that's why, like, your parents still matter, even though you're like becoming independent. And, and that way you can show more of the like, systemic and structural issues, while also highlighting individual friendships or like adult-student relationships.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 21:46

Yes, yes. They're not cynical yet. Like they, they really do have this brightness of hope. Theym it's nice when they share it with us, too.

J Joanna Ho 21:57

Yeah. And they are resilient. That's the thing too, is they're so, they go through so much. Like I think sometimes we do a disservice to high school students, people talk down to them, or they minimize the things they go through. But if you remember when you were in high school, like the thing that was really tearing you up was really tearing you up, and maybe as a 40-year-old mom, I'm like, "That's really not that big of a deal." But like, yeah, then they they navigate, I think the complexities of the things that they have to navigate, we sometimes forget when we're adults.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 22:29

Yeah. Yeah, I think you're totally right. Well, one of I mean, so many of the scenes took place at school, but one of the ones that really stuck out to me and had me reflecting was when they wrote the "I Am From" poems. So I was wondering, can you just kind of describe what that poem is. And then I'm also wondering if you've ever done that exercise with a group of students?

J Joanna Ho 22:50

Yeah. So an "I Am From" poem basically, it's like I am from, and then you sort of whatever's in your heart, where you from what sounds you know, prompt might be like, the smells, the memories, the tastes, the feelings, whatever. And then it's sort of like an outpouring of what that means for you. It can be an identity exercise, but it's nice, because it's open ended, it can be so many things. And I actually remember doing that in grad school, and feeling like, it's like one of the first times I did an exercise like that in an academic setting that felt like creative and so personal. And I remember like, feeling really moved by everyone else's "I Am From" poem. So I have tried it with students, and it's always just this beautiful, moving thing. You know,

whatever it is they choose to share. Sometimes it's very deeply personal. Sometimes it's, it doesn't seem like it is but it is still because it's part of who they are. And what came out at that time. So yeah, I love those.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 23:51

Well, it's making me wonder, what is the power behind exploring your own identity as you're stepping into a space of activism?

J Joanna Ho 24:00

Yeah, I that is such a great question. I think for me, I think understanding our identity also lives within the context of it, understanding our family stories, understanding our history, and those things all go together. So there is an aspect of me personally, who I am how I identify as like Asian as female, as cis and straight, as you know, as a mom as an educator, but then there's also contextually ways things that have impacted who I am and how I experience the world and how the world sees me. And so I feel like it has been, sadly like a more recent thing where I've, you know, personally taken it upon myself to learn more stories about my mom. Like so on a more personal note, I am recently divorced, and I'm a single mom and I was raised by a single mom. And it wasn't until I became a single mom that I even thought to ask. I asked my mom questions like, "How did you do it?" You didn't even, I have multiple degrees, and I have a career, but she didn't have any of that. And she was an immigrant. And wow, it's like, it never occurred to me to ask how she hustled to make this life for us in such a way that like, I didn't even know as a kid how stressful it was for her, you know. We didn't have money. And she was selling things at the flea market. And now she has built herself this like life and, like, provided us opportunities. And, and things like that, like knowing those stories. And I never thought to ask that. And that strengthened my relationship with my mom. It's helped me see her for what she's done and, and recognize the way she loves me. But putting that in context of like, the systems within which we live, the history that impacts all of us now, is necessary, because when we're having these conversations about race or about activism, when there are these huge, blind spots, and for Asians in America, it's just like a straight erasure. We're having ignorant conversations without understanding that history. And therefore the conversations we're having are incomplete, because we're not taking all of these things into account.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 26:16

Yes, and I really appreciated how the white students participating in the "I Am From" exercise, and just the identity work in general, really gave them a foundation for starting to have conversations about race, and you know, just all the things that were going on. It just seemed like they needed to start there, too. And I mean, there's research behind that. But I was so grateful that you were able to illustrate that in a way that, like the normal person who doesn't do think about anti-racism every minute, like we do, would be able to pick up on that and see how important that is. Can you talk about why Black, Asian and Asian solidarity was such a focal point of the narrative?

J Joanna Ho 27:01

Yeah, I think there's a personal and then there's like a larger context. I think from a larger context, like the racial dialogue in this country has for very long tended to operate on a Black-white dichotomy, right? You're either Black or white and, and so for so long as an Asian person, you're trying to fit on this line, and then you realize, like, "I don't really fit, like, I have to carve my own space." So there's that part of the conversation, then the other part, which is that like, there has also been like a lot of historical, very intentional division between Asian and Black communities. And using that separation, and that antagonism to then harm social progress. And, and the erasure of solidarity movements between Black and Asian communities. And I think that, and for me, like I have, so of them personal like talked about my really good friend, I talked about my dance group in college, like, I there's a lot of power in the solidarity, there are a lot of shared parallel experiences. And there's a lot of very clear differences. But ultimately, I think I wanted to explore the, like widening of this racial binary, and like the expansion of that space, but also wanting to explore reasons why we have been pitted against each other. And to tell more of the stories of why we should work in solidarity and why it's hard, and why there's ignorance on both sides. And there's absolutely anti-Black racism in Asian communities. And I also feel like I experienced, like anti-Asian racism from Black community sometimes. And I think all of that is rooted in a very systemic, intentional, you know, it's comes from an intentional space. I wanted to just explore that and open opportunities for dialogue, and to show the complexity. And and again, personally, because I have such good friends, with whom that has been a reality where we can work and just have share so much love, truthfully,

J Jasmine Bradshaw 29:09

The power and the solidarity is so deep and, and in the shared experience, I think that that is what keeps, like the systemic forces keeping us apart. It's almost like they know how powerful we'll be when we tell each other like, "Oh, I've been through that too." And it reminds me a lot of, I don't think that people understand that Dr. King wasn't assassinated until he started bringing together impoverished white people and saying, like, "Hey, you're experiencing like a crappy thing too. Like, don't you think we should do something about this?" Right? And he was bringing these communities together, and then that's when they said "No more," and and they killed them. And so it's just like, you I think that people don't necessarily see that when we focus on only one community, it's not, there's no way we can solve this massive problem, because it's so interconnected,

J Jasmine Bradshaw 29:10

Which is why we need more stories.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 30:05

Well, speaking of stories, because one of the biggest quotes, I mean, so many, I wrote down so many quotes from the book, but one of the things that like I felt like almost slapped me across the face, it was when, I think it was May's teacher, and she says, "People who won't listen to arguments or facts can still be changed by stories." And I wrote it down on a poster and I put it on my mirror, because I was like, this is something...well, first of all, it seems like this is not just

the principle of your book. It feels like it's kind of the principal, like the guiding principle of your career. So I'm wondering if that's fair to say. But then I also want you to share a little bit about why is storytelling, such a huge part of activism?

J Joanna Ho 30:47

Sometimes, I'll take, let's take us back to like, some big movie like, I don't know, even if it's super problematic, like "The Blind Side," for example, yes, right. It's very problematic. But like, and so you know, I don't even know if I want to say like, "Oh, he was so humanized," but there's something about a story and knowing someone personally, or feeling like you know them, and recognizing their humanity, that allows you to feel connected, and then to care, right. And so even if you throw a bunch of statistics, like X number of people died because of COVID, or X number of people, whatever, you know, this, racism... And like the facts, and the statistics don't mean anything, until there's like a human face behind the refugee crisis. And suddenly, it's a child who's drowned, and then their dad is sobbing, by their you know, and then suddenly, it's real. And so I think that the power of story is that for people who are closed off to the argument, which is, frankly, so many of us, right, arguing with people who we don't agree with, it's very hard to disconnect when you feel something when you feel empathy, or when you feel like you have some shared connection or shared humanity with someone else. And so, you can't argue with that, like somebody else's experience and their pain or their joy, you can either, it can either resonate with you, or you can not understand it, but you can say that they're wrong about their experience, you know. And so I think that is one power in story.

J Joanna Ho 32:18

And then to your other comment, I think that storytelling has certainly become, as I think I've come to this, you know, for a long time, and I still really believe in the power of education, for sure, in terms of creating change. I think for me, I've found that I have found my own voice through storytelling and in an ability to say things that I think. I am very bad at, for example, at like a person-to-person debate. I get very tongue tied, I can't speak clearly. All my thoughts are jumbled, and then my brain shuts off. But for whatever reason, I feel able to translate things that I feel really passionately about into stories. And I often start my stories from a place where you know, writers are told not to start, like, they always say, "Don't start with the lesson, because then your story gets too didactic." I'm always starting, like, "I want to write a story about anti-Asian racism, I want to write a story about like, the beauty of Asian eyes, like, this is what I want my readers to take away." And then I have to like, tone it down, and then find the story with that message, because I think that's not always the best place to start. But for me, that's what drives my storytelling.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 33:29

Mm hmm. Well, that's so funny that you used the word didactic, because I was going to say it is not didactic. And that was one of my favorite things. Because I really, I really was thinking while I'm reading it, like she's doing such a good job of saying all the things that I wish I could say to my white friends without making them just shut down. And so I thought that was really powerful. There was one part where she says to one of the white kids in her class, like "Stop apologizing and help me do something." And I was like, "That is what I want to say to

everybody." So I was grateful that in the context of this story, it was like, totally appropriate, and it just felt like, I don't know, it felt really empowering for me to see this high schooler who obviously is not a real person, but basically, you know, like, standing up and saying that and I'm like, "Yeah, like some apologizing just help me." Like I don't need your sorry, I just need your help. Yeah, right.

J Joanna Ho 34:23

Or listen or watch something. Stop feeling like feel bad. Sure, feel bad, but like do the thing. Yeah, thank you to wonderful editors who helped me revise that. There was like one part where the conversation I think, the classroom conversation where they're having this like, you know, intense whatever that used to just be like a bulleted point list of like the all the facts that I wanted people to know about history, and clearly has been through multiple revisions. Because I was like avoiding writing the scene and I was like, May is just going to take notes and here's a copy of her notes. And like, my agents like, "No, like, that's not gonna work. You can't do that. Stop being lazy."

J Jasmine Bradshaw 35:08

That's fantastic. Oh my gosh, I love the behind-the-scenes. Okay, so let's say somebody's at the library, they're like walking through the shelves, and they see "The Silence That Binds Us" and you have a chance to just be right over their shoulder, what do you want them to know?

J Joanna Ho 35:23

I want them to know, they should pick it up and read it. I mean, that's okay. But I think I would really like them to know that there is so much hope and laughter and joy in the story. Because when you read the premise, it sounds very dark and depressing. And I know, as you said, there are parts, which, sorry, not sorry, like, make you cry. But I also hope that when you read it, you come away, like, it's back to what you were saying about teenagers and humans, I think, that we can both simultaneously experience like deep sorrow, and also profound joy, and we can laugh, and we can cry. And those things are not all in separate compartments. And so even though there are some really tragic things that happened that caused all this grief, there is a lot of love, and, and laughter and light in the story, too. So hopefully, when you read it, you don't come away feeling really depressed. But hopefully you come away feeling energized and activated.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 36:23

Mm hmm. No, I can attest to that. For sure. I cracked up and I loved it. And yeah, like you said, I saw so many of myself and my friends and the characters. And it was just...yeah, it was amazing. Okay, the last thing I want to ask you about which I wish that I did not even have to talk about this at all, but banning books. Okay, if I don't even know where to start. But basically, I just feel like if you could kind of get through to these parents who are trying to ban all of our books that represent our marginalized kiddos, and like, actually are mirror books for someone other than white children and allow our children to finally our children of color, and

you know, our children our LGBT children and all of our marginalized children to actually see themselves like, what would you say to these parents? How would you try to help them understand that what they're doing really sucks?

J Joanna Ho 37:23

Like the cynic, part of me is just like, people, you should read the books you are trying to ban. Like, step one, before you go talking about groomers and all these things, like read the book. Because 99% of them haven't read any of these books. That's number one. And then there's this cynical part of me is like, "I wouldn't say anything, because they're not gonna listen." The reality is what I wish they knew is that I guess the, what comes to mind actually, is something that I think I can't, I can't even remember who said it in "The Silence That Binds Us," but it's, I think, to Mr. McIntyre, Josh's Dad, where it's about like, "You're not, you're not trying to make the world better, right, for you're trying to keep it the same. You're not trying to make it better for me." And so I think it's a similar thing is recognizing that they're actually harming their own children by taking away the stories from them that will allow them to have a greater perspective of the world and a greater understanding and appreciation of other people. And there is not one parent who I think would say like, "I want to raise a completely self-centered child who can only understand their own perspective," like, no parent wants that. Yeah. And so the political game, and the political rhetoric is harming everyone. I always hate answering a question like this in terms of like, needing to defend and justify my own existence and the value of my own stories. But like, obviously, I think that they're valuable and that people need to value them. And I'm tired. I'm tired of having to fight for my own, like for others to recognize, like our humanity, and our value and our worth.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 39:09

Yes, yeah. Okay, read the book. That's a brilliant response. Yes, I'm gonna take that and put it in my back pocket for the next time I run into one of those people. Yes, read the stinking book people!

J Joanna Ho 39:21

I heard of these parents who got together, I can't remember what state they're in. But they got together. And like, anytime someone brought up a book, you know, because it's very organized. It's not like random parents. It's like a very intentional, very organized movement. And they would go to school board meetings. And so what they would do is, they would read the book and then come because you only have like, two minutes to speak. And they would give a summary of exactly what the book is about, and then be like, "Okay, what's the problem again?" and then once because nobody's read most of the books, you know, that are being attempted to be banned. And so when someone actually read them, and it's like, this book is about a little girl who wants to be Charlotte in "Charlotte's Web." Like, what's the problem? She happens to be transgender? And? You know, yeah, it's so there is a lot that I think what I would want listeners to know is that there's a lot that you can do. And PEN America P-E-N dot O-R-G I think just released a really important, I think findings about the movement to censor books. And then within that there are, I think lots of things that can be done. And I know We Need Diverse Books is also going to launch something in the next few weeks. And so I would just like

stay tuned and look forward to those things. Because there is a lot you can do. Pay attention to what's happening around you and, and make sure that you're aware if these things are happening, because you can speak out. And that makes a difference.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 40:51

Definitely always. And I will include those two links in the show notes for anybody who wants to go and look into what they can do. But one of the things you can do is like give them to your child's teacher, they put them in your kiddo's library. And I think the hard part is that so many teachers are not even into this book banning garbage. So if we are able to support our teachers, they will feel like they have more of a voice.

J Joanna Ho 41:18

Also and also pay attention to your election. Like there's some states where teachers can't even take gifts of books without getting those gifts approved. My gosh, they can't do Scholastic book fairs in Florida. They can't they can't even do read-alouds in their classrooms in an elementary school classroom, unless the book has been approved. And so pay attention to who you're electing to office because these things absolutely make a difference in what's happening in your schools.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 41:44

But they can have anyone with a pulse be a teacher, but that teacher can't read a book. No, that part oh my gosh, so many problems. Oh my gosh. Well, Joanna, thank you so much. Tell us before you go, Where can we find you? Where can we find "The Silence That Binds Us: and all your other books?

J Joanna Ho 42:01

Okay, so you can find me, everything is Joanna Ho Writes. So my website is joannahowrites.com. My Instagram, Twitter, and my tik tok that I never post on is also all Joanna Ho writes. So you can find me there, I'm most active on Instagram. And you can find "The Silence That Binds Us" pretty much anywhere books are sold. It's at Target Barnes and Noble, I would recommend, you know, indie bookstores always. And in terms of what I have coming up, I have three picture books coming out next year. So the next one is in March, it is sort of a mother's love letter to her newborn son. And it has a very positive masculinity and anti-toxic masculinity sort of message there. I have one I'm really excited about called "Say My Name," and that is about seeing our names correctly. And it covers and it goes follows like six children of different ethnicities and like tells the stories and the meanings behind their names. And I'm really excited about that one. And then the next one for next year is a picture book biography about Ai Weiwei, the Chinese artist-activist and specifically focused on his work around refugees. So that's next year.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 43:18

Jasmine Bradshaw 43:29

That's amazing. I don't know how, you are so prolific. That's so cool. Oh, my gosh, well, I'm so grateful for you. I'm so grateful for you sharing your gift with the world, because I know how hard it is to put yourself out there, but you are so good at it.

J Joanna Ho 43:33

And I'm grateful for you. And thank you for having me. It has been such a joy.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 43:38

Oh my goodness. My goodness. Isn't she brilliant? She just is one of those people who when she opens your mouth, you feel at ease. You know what I mean? And she's sharing such important truths. And I'm just really, really grateful that she came here to share her wisdom and knowledge with us. And oh my gosh, if you haven't read her book yet, what are you waiting for? It's so good. Please read it so that we can talk about it together. I want to know which character you identify with the most. Seriously come over on Instagram and talk to us about "The Silence That Binds Us" because all of us here at team First Name Basis have read it at this point and we are like fangirling so hard. It's so so good.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 44:15

Okay, don't forget about our Policy Party that's coming up next Tuesday about being an ally to the refugee community with my friend Lindsey Dusard and I will see you there.

J Jasmine Bradshaw 44:27

My friends, thank you for being here. I hope you can feel how much I believe in you, and how deeply I know that when we work together we can make a real change in our communities. Any of the books or podcasts or articles that I reference will be linked in the show notes. If you are looking for more detailed notes, be sure to head over to our Patreon community. On our Patreon site I provide all of the outlines that I use to make the episodes and everything is linked there, so you don't have to take furious notes while you are listening. And don't forget to join us over on Instagram at [firstname.basis](https://www.instagram.com/firstname.basis). If you're interested in partnering with First Name basis or doing some kind of collaboration, please email us at hello@firstnamebasis.org. All right, have a great week my friends, and I will talk to you again soon