



## Open Mic: Riffs on Life Between Cultures in Ten Voices

*Mitali Perkins (Editor) , David Yoo (Contributor) , Cherry Cheva (Contributor) , Varian Johnson (Contributor) , G. Neri (Contributor) , Naomi Shihab Nye (Contributor) , Olugbemisola Rhuday-Perkovich (Contributor) , Debbie Rigaud (Contributor) , more... Francisco X. Stork (Contributor) , Gene Luen Yang (Contributor) ...less*

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**Using humor as the common denominator, a multicultural cast of YA authors steps up to the mic to share stories touching on race.**

Listen in as ten YA authors -- some familiar, some new -- use their own brand of humor to share their stories about growing up between cultures. Henry Choi Lee discovers that pretending to be a tai chi master or a sought-after wiz at math wins him friends for a while -- until it comically backfires. A biracial girl is amused when her dad clears seats for his family on a crowded subway in under a minute flat, simply by sitting quietly in between two uptight white women. Edited by acclaimed author and speaker Mitali Perkins, this collection of fiction and nonfiction uses a mix of styles as diverse as their authors, from laugh-out-loud funny to wry, ironic, or poignant, in prose, poetry, and comic form.

Mitali Perkins  
David Yoo  
Cherry Cheva  
Varian Johnson  
G. Neri  
Naomi Shihab Nye  
Olugbemisola Rhuday-Perkovich  
Debbie Rigaud  
Francisco X. Stork  
Gene Luen Yang

### Open Mic: Riffs on Life Between Cultures in Ten Voices Details

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## From Reader Review Open Mic: Riffs on Life Between Cultures in Ten Voices for online ebook

### Jeanne Deichmueller says

Easy, interesting read- was not as insightful about diverse cultures as I had hoped.

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### bjneary says

This is a Goodreads December book club title and each of the ten stories by YA authors who have lived between cultures (Mitali Perkins, Varian Johnson, G. Neri and Francisco X. Stork, to name a few) and have penned mainly stories with humor to give readers their multicultural view of the world. As I read the verse story, *Under Berlin* by G. Neri, I was constantly surprised by her father as they stood in a crowded train filled with white Germans and their black father and Hispanic mother. It was a game her played with his children and I chuckled with how G. Neri unfolded each word to show her father's calm, his conversation, his friendliness, and how to snag seats for his family. In Francisco X. Stork's, *Brotherly Love*, it is his older sister he goes to for information to a nagging question. Mitali Perkins short story, *Three-Pointer*, was a great story about sisters, love and the points it can garner. I am looking forward to re-reading all of these stories; they are real, poignant, and funny.

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### destiny ? [howling libraries] says

This was my first assigned read for my summer master's degree program course, *Multicultural Youth Literature*, and I have to say it was a solid start to the reading list! I won't be doing full reviews for most of the books on my reading list, but I did enjoy this one enough to give you a quick rundown. (Unfortunately, I just don't think the pieces in this collection were meaty enough to give a story-by-story breakdown like I usually do with anthologies.)

*Open Mic* is a short anthology collection of a mixture of nonfiction and fiction own-voice stories about being a teen of color in today's world. There are sad stories, happy stories, funny ones, and downright infuriating ones (in the sense of, "How do we live in a world where people still treat each other this poorly?!").

My notable favorites were:

*Why I Won't Be Watching the Last Airbender Movie* by Gene Luen Yang:

A very short comic about how boycotting the whitewashed A:TLA film adaptation landed Gene his role as the creator of the incredible A:TLA graphic novels! This one struck me especially, because I've been a huge fan of A:TLA since the day it first aired, and, well... *there is no movie in Ba Sing Se!*

*Brotherly Love* by Francisco X. Stork:

A piece that felt as though it could've been fiction or nonfiction, regarding toxic masculinity and homophobia in a Latinx family, and the love that siblings have for one another. This one was absolutely precious.

All of the stories in this collection are worth a read, though, and I strongly encourage you to pick it up! The teens represented in the anthology range from black, Asian, Latinx, Haitian, Indian, and more.

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Time to start my first assigned read for my summer MLIS course! I haven't had assigned reading in a veeeeery long time...

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## **Francesca Forrest says**

This is actually a very slim book; the ten selections are each quite short, so it's best enjoyed as tiny tastes. In that mode it works very well. Each piece had pleasing and unique element in it that contributed to the theme of life between cultures. Here's a peek at my favorite moments in each:

David Yoo: "Becoming Henry Lee." I laughed out loud when titular character's parents couldn't keep straight the white actors in a movie and "were convinced the movie was a psychological thriller about one white guy who had multiple personalities warring each other in his head."

Gene Luen Yang: "Why I Won't Be Watching the Last Airbender Movie." Done as a comic, this nonfiction piece recapped the controversy when the human-acted Last Airbender came out--with the protagonists white-washed. It has a happy ending: thanks to his protest, Gene Luen Yang got offered a chance to create graphic novels in the Avatar: The Last Airbender universe.

Cherry Cheva: "Talent Show." Enjoyed the logic behind why Gretchen, an ultra-nervous would-be comedian, turns down Josh's proffered date.

Debbie Rigau: "Voila!" Loved Simone's change of heart regarding bossy, clueless Waverly when Waverly points out that Simone can get credit for acting as an interpreter for Haitian-Creole-speaking patients at the little clinic they're both visiting--Simone accompanying her aunt and Waverly as part of their high school's volunteer program.

Mitali Perkins: "Three-Pointer." It can be annoying, if you're dark skinned, to constantly have your skin color compared to foods like chocolate or coffee. Mitali Perkins gets a dig in, comparing pale European skin tones to deli-sliced turkey, which made me laugh because it's so precisely accurate. (I also was happy to learn the meaning of the name "Mitali": friendly.)

Varian Johnson: "Like Me." Initially, Griffin's the only black student at his high school. The degree to which everyone pays attention to him during black history month was painfully hilarious.

Olugbemisola Rhuday-Perkovich: "Confessions of a Black Geek." Racism comes to the surface when the high-achieving narrator gets into colleges that her white classmates are rejected from. It was painful to see it happen but heartening to see the narrator embrace her accomplishments.

G. Neri: "Under Berlin." Told in verse, this contribution was one of my favorites, because it showed diversity not only within the narrator's family (black dad, Hispanic mom), but in Germany, where the family is living. The changing makeup of the subway car the family rides, and the concluding lines of the story, were beautiful.

Francisco X. Stork: "Brotherly Love." A really delicately told story of an older brother's support of his

younger brother in the face of a father who has very rigid, traditional notions of gender and masculinity. I liked when Rosalinda, the older sister, shares what Bernie, the older brother, said in support of Luis: "God made all kinds of Mexican guys."

Naomi Shihab Nye: "Lexicon." Another tale--or tribute, really--in verse, a lovely portrait of the narrator's father. We need, the narrator says, words with hems and pockets, words like *umbrella, flashlight, milk, pencil, blizzard, song*.

A lovely bouquet, and I'll look for longer works from the contributors.

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### **Beth says**

Open Mic is an amazing collection of voices that uses humor to talk about life between cultures. The only reason I gave it 4 stars instead of 5 is because I wanted it to be longer. I wanted to hear more voices and read more cross-cultural celebrations. I REALLY hope this becomes a series. The world needs more stories that use humor to bridge the cultural divide.

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### **Lindsey says**

A very quick read!

My favorites in this slim anthology of multicultural voices were

"Becoming Henry Lee"--Henry Lee fights Asian stereotypes then embraces them. In the end, he finds himself.

"Voila"--A Haitian American teen waits with her Aunt in the doctor's office and runs into some kids from her school volunteering to help the poor.

"Three-Pointer"--Three sisters develop a point system related to the attention and affection boys give them. The youngest has difficulty getting three points because most of the boys prefer their girls like sliced pink turkey rather than toasted brown.

"Under Berlin"--in verse--Berlin represents both the past and the future with its neighborhoods and monuments. The subway provides the same cultural map of the "old ways" and the future, too.

"Brotherly Love"--the younger brother realizes how much his older brother protects him from stereotypes and bigotry.

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### **Liza Wiemer says**

*Open Mic: Riffs on Life Between Cultures in Ten Voices* had me smiling and nodding and understanding about how we can get caught up in stereotypes and label people, which cause pain for those who are in the

middle of it all. It made me think of my own stories and how one of my most favorite things to do is to talk to strangers (safely and often to the chagrin of my young adult children) to learn more about their cultures and, most importantly, the individual.

Some of my most fascinating conversations have taken place with New York cab drivers who, in my opinion, are often stereotyped because many are foreigners. Some of the stereotypes that I've heard from them are: they're uneducated, unable to speak English, and out to rip you off. I'm not a New Yorker, but my experience doesn't support this at all.

Here are some examples:

I met a Haitian man who spoke eight fluent languages and came to the US to earn money and further his education. He told me the frustrations he's experienced by disrespectful patrons who treat him like garbage. Imagine the shock they have when he answers them in their native language, for example German. On a positive note, he told me about how he visits Haiti every few years, how there is pride for being a nation that paid for its emancipation long before the US abolished slavery. Our conversation was eye-opening.

I met an Pakistani who had a degree in electrical engineering, had worked for a company in the US for years before he was downsized during the financial crisis. He's been driving cab since to make sure his family would be taken care of. He was so proud of his daughter who received a scholarship to attend a top university and his son was in the process of completing medical school.

I met a African American man who had been driving for thirty years, married to his wife for the same, and was struggling with his older son who had moved to Colorado and had cut ties with the family while his three daughters (the youngest in fashion design) were still in NY pursuing their careers and raising families. A year later, I just happened to get into a cab he was driving. Imagine the shock when I reminded him of our conversation. It was like reconnecting with a friend, and boy was I thrilled to hear that his son was back in communication and that things were much better between all of them.

When I exited these cabs, I let these people know how grateful and humbled and honored I was to hear their stories. They taught me much about life, love, loyalty, family, hard work, determination, frustration of not being respected (even though they're a lot smarter than most of the people who ride with them - ah yeah and that includes me - I only speak one language fluently and can understand and muddle my way through another. Electrical engineering is also a foreign language to me.)

Anyway, if you're still with me on this review (I hope so) you'll understand that *Open Mic: Riffs on Life Between Cultures in Ten Voices* is about authors sharing their special stories, which will hopefully get you thinking about your own or about the stories of people you work with, go to school with, or meet without placing judgments or stereotypes on them because of race, religion, color.

Beautifully done. I enjoyed this very much.

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## **Jen Doucette says**

Simple collection of stories geared to young adults. I liked the variety in genres and the transparency of the method. I was looking for potential mentor texts for my writing classes, and I found a good one in the poem "Under Berlin" about an African American/ Hispanic family living in Berlin.

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## **Karly Grice says**

I loved this book and can't say enough about it (so my short review won't do it justice). This collection of various short pieces was a great read written by some of the best YA authors of color today. If you read nothing else in it, take the time to read editor Mitali Perkins's introduction to the piece which is great for taking out and using for class discussions. My only complaint about the book is that I wanted more! It was

short but compelling (and probably as a result perfect for the intended teen audience), but I would love to see future editions with even more pieces!

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### **Carolyn Wilhelm says**

Wonderful book which uses appropriate humor of several authors expressing how racism feels. We need more books like this one. For middle-secondary students. Great discussion starters.

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### **Leslie says**

As Mitali Perkins observes in her “Introduction,” “humor has the power to break down barriers and cross borders. Once you’ve shared a laugh with someone, it’s almost impossible to see them as ‘other’” (x). Open Mic wants to tap into this power, employing ten gifted humorists to talk about growing up between cultures. There are prose and poems (x2) and a comic by Gene Luen Yang (ABC Chinese, Boxers & Saints), and even the comedic stylings vary so Perkins does a great job preparing for a broad readership—in other words, you can hand this to any middle-grader and they should find at least one out of the ten that will entertain.

Perkins does set down some rules, understanding that race can be a “tension-filled arena” (xi). It is a really good guide and includes a paragraph each in explication (which I obviously chose not to include below):

1. Good humor pokes fun at the powerful—not the weak.
2. Good humor builds affection for the “other.”
3. Good humor is usually self-deprecatory (note: not self-defecatory, although it can feel like that). (xi-xii)

A last bit from the “Introduction” on a hot topic in literature:

"While I usually don't like edicts about who can write about whom, in a post-9/11 North America, where segregation, slavery and even genocide aren't too far back in history, funny multicultural stories work best when the author shares the protagonist's race or culture. Funny is powerful, and that's why in this case it does matter who tells a story. Writing that explores issues of race and ethnicity with a touch of humor must stay closer to memoir than other kinds of fiction on the spectrum of storytelling." (xii)

That said, none of the authors are White. Of the ten stories (a temperate number that hopefully hints at a series) Perkins includes herself and a brilliant variation of cultures w/ authors coming directly (born in) or indirectly (generational) from roots in Mexico, Thailand, Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, Palestine, India; Hispanic, African-American, or as G.Neri describes himself: “I’m Creole, Filipino, and Mexican—or as I like to call it, Crefilican. On top of that, my daughter is also German” (124). Many of the authors are well-traveled since childhood, and Debbie Rigaud is currently living in Bermuda.

What follows are brief remarks on the contents w/ links to author sites. One of reasons I love anthologies (on young and older shelves) is the opportunity to meet new voices and discover new reads. Many of these authors write Young Adult and, er, Not-Just-Young-Adult literature, like David Yoo who begins the collection with a good humor-setting tone, accessibility (read familiarity for anyone, including those of my western European ancestry), and insight the anthology is going for. The collection ends with some especially strong story-telling. (\*=favorites)

“Becoming Henry Lee” by David Yoo (Choke Artist, The Detention Club) prose (1-13).

This Korean-American protagonist is neither White nor Asian enough to abide by those (un)comfortable and ill-fitted cultural stereotypes. Besides dealing with public personas and private crises of identity (think school & parental aspirations), Yoo touches on fetishization of culture, a step beyond mere appropriation. Big kid words, I know, but Yoo balances what even a young reader will understand as serious beneath that palatable guise of good humor.

“Why I Won’t Be Watching the Last Airbender Movie” by Gene Luen Yang. comic (16-9). \*

first: Derek Kirk Kim (Same Difference, The Eternal Smile, Good as Lily) makes an appearance. Of course, the two are friends and frequent collaborators, but they also share a similar stake in what the comic is about. White-washing happens in multiple forms, as does cultural ventriloquism. Speaking up against this is of import for multiple reasons, and Yang offers a unexpected point to the story’s ending. A point of contention offers an invitation to engage (if not instigate) a conversation; what if it offered an invitation in return?

“Talent Show” by Cherry Cheva (author; writer & exec. producer on Family Guy) prose (20-30). \*

Two students, a Jewish male and Asian female, await their turn to audition for the school talent show. It is sweet and funny and I can’t say too much because it would just recalibrate expectations: which is some of what the piece is about.

“Voilà!” by Debbie Rigaud (Perfect Shot) prose (31-42).

“Yup—I’m fourteen now.” I nod, squeezing the last bit of polite from my reserves. “And yes—both my parents are from Haiti.” [...] I shrug. People have assumed this before—that I’m only half Haitian. Or at least, those who can’t understand how a person with longer hair or lighter skin could come from Haiti” (32-33)

Above illustrates just one form of misidentification that Rigaud explores; language and other popular assumptions make appearances. Rigaud has fun with miscommunication up until the very end both lamenting and finding humor in people’s ignorance.

“Three Pointer” by Mitali Perkins (Bamboo People, Secret Keeper) prose (43-54).

Three Indian sisters, of whom the narrator is the youngest, play the “Guy Game,” yes, it has to do with dating—and no, their parents who were arranging marriages and degree programs were left unaware of their antics (44). The premise facilitates also sorts of topics on cultural and generational differences and similarities in ways that educate and certainly entertain.

“Like Me” by Varian Johnson (Saving Maddie, My Life as a Rhombus) prose (55-68). \*

“With about thirty students per grade, Hobbs is the smallest boarding school in Vermont. Our demographics are just like the state’s. White, white, and white.

“I guess that’s not fair. Technically Rebecca is “one-eighth German, three-eighths Sephardic-Jewish, and one-half Irish.” And Evan has enough Muskogee blood running through him to be a member of the Creek Nation. Still, I didn’t see anyone looking at them when we talked about the Holocaust or the Trail of Tears last year in World History. But let anyone mention Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. or Will Smith or even the slightly black-looking dude who trims Principal Greer’s prized rosebushes, and suddenly I’m the center of the attention.” (57)

Now twin girls have joined Hobbs and the questions of relationships begin to surface. Seeing and not seeing difference is handled deftly while calling out those awkward conversations on stereotype, in-group

criticisms, the jokes people tell that aren't all that funny.

“Confessions of a Black Geek” by Olugbemisola Rhuday-Perkovich (8th Grade Super Zero) prose (69-78).

I found the pop culture references amusing and was interested in where black geek and white geek might diverge or intersect. The seriousness, how personal, had a diminishing effect on earlier comedic tones at the close. Do not expect the stories to end on punch-lines, many have a heartening declaration like this one.

“Under Berlin” G. Neri (Yummy, Ghetto Cowboy) long poem (79-99) \*\*

My dad is black,/in a real southern way./But Mom is a light-skinned Hispanic/from Puerto Rico,/so I'm as black as Obama, I guess,/which is only half./My bro rolls his eyes. “Sorry./I meant ‘mixed American;” (83).

I am not awarding this one extra points for mention of currywurst, but the story of a family on the subway (in the literal underbelly) of Berlin is one of my favorites. It is rich with personality, like many of the others, but easy and playful, tender and smart, despite that “tension-filled arena.”

“Brotherly Love” by Francisco X. Stork (Marcelo and the Real World, Irises) prose (100-13). \*\*

Touching on machismo and religion, sweetly and deftly, Stork is unsurprisingly pitch-perfect with this story about Luis talking to his sister. Sometimes that life between cultures is experience within a community and between generations and gender. This one is so well-done.

“Lexicon” by Naomi Shihab Nye (Habibi) long poem (114-21) \*\*

“Half-baked, mix of East and West,/balancing flavors” the narrator speaks lovingly about her Arab father, about the power of words and perspective. There are some truly lovely images and lines: “words like parks to sit in.” “My father’s tongue had no bitch/hiding under it.” “But dying, this lover of life said sadly,/My dilemma is large.

L (omphaloskepsis)

<http://contemplatrix.wordpress.com/20...>

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## Crystalee says

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Edited by Mitali Perkins

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Using humor as the common denominator, a multicultural cast of YA authors steps up to the mic to share stories touching on race.

Listen in as ten YA authors — some familiar, some new — use their own brand of humor to share their stories about growing up between cultures. Henry Choi Lee discovers that pretending to be a tai chi master or a sought-after wiz at math wins him friends for a while — until it comically backfires. A biracial girl is amused when her dad clears seats for his family on a crowded subway in under a minute flat, simply by sitting quietly in between two uptight white women. Edited by acclaimed author and speaker Mitali Perkins,

this collection of fiction and nonfiction uses a mix of styles as diverse as their authors, from laugh-out-loud funny to wry, ironic, or poignant, in prose, poetry, and comic form.

In her introduction to this book, Mitali Perkins makes it clear that its goal is to use humor “to break down barriers and draw us together across borders.” Each story in this volume is as different as the author who wrote it—different cultures, locations and experiences—but all of them show how even those we perceive as being “different” share embarrassingly laughable moments.

From David Yoo, who writes about a young Chinese boy who decides to use all of the Chinese stereotypes to his advantage, and soon finds himself in over his head, to Naomi Shihab Nye’s poetic account of growing up Palestinian-American, there’s something for every teen’s taste. I would recommend this book for older teens, just because there are some mild references to sex, but I think anyone over the age of 13 will relate to at least one of these hilarious stories. Even though I didn’t grow up “between cultures,” as Perkins calls it, I can definitely relate to the embarrassment that each of these characters faced. That, I think, speaks to the power of this simple book. By laughing together, we come together.

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### **Joyce Yattoni says**

Short essays from multicultural authors describing what it was like to grow up in a world where differences are not always perceived as welcoming. This book made me uncomfortable, mostly because I don't spend much time in understanding cultural differences. I just assume that if I respect people of all cultures that is good. Is it enough? This book also made me think more purposely about my own implicit bias.

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### **Rachel Hong says**

I read this book in 8th grade, for english class but as a book talk cafe book. It was inspiring and touching book to read as each chapter was a different culture and race, talking about people's culture and beliefs. My favorite chapter was the one about brothers, how the younger brother and oldest sister was concerned for the middle son, about his love life and they cried together, in hopes for him and his relationship.

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### **Nicole Perry says**

This is a nice sampling of writings from Americans with all kinds of different ethnic backgrounds. It was easy to jump in and out of. I have discovered a few authors who I would like to read more from.

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