

Helen Wan's 'The Partner Track' is no 'Joy Luck Club' And Thank Goodness for That

BY DANA TER



There's a scene from *The Partner Track* when the protagonist is gossiping to her best friend over brunch in an Upper West Side café about the previous night's escapade with a handsome co-worker. It is a quintessential representation of the life of a young, sophisticated career woman living in New York City circa 2013.

So should it matter that the book's protagonist Ingrid Yung is an Asian American woman? According to author Helen Wan, the answer is both yes and no. It should not matter because (surprise!) Asian Americans do normal things, and yet a story like this has not been told before. It is always a soul-searching trip to China, she said, or a setting in Chinatown where the character lives above a Chinese takeout place.

Why not make Ingrid blonde then, a publisher had asked Wan. Since the story is about anyone, right? Wan refused, insisting that it would detract from the entire purpose of the book. "A huge

misperception from people who have not read the book," Wan explained, "is that it's a rant against blatant racism." Far from that, *The Partner Track* explores the subtleties and nuances that inherently comes with being the only Asian American female lawyer in a senior position at a prestigious Manhattan law firm.

"A lot of people have been put in situations where conversations are exclusionary in nature," Wan elaborated. This has sometimes been the case in her own experience at cocktail parties and expense lunches. "Once I was at a lunch where

everyone was talking about a sailing club in Connecticut, and knowing nothing about sailing, I tried to steer the conversation in another direction."

Like her protagonist, Wan has often times found herself to be the only Asian American woman in a room. "In such a situation, there are two weapons that one needs in their arsenal," Wan said. "A quick and ready sense of humor, and the ability to pick one's battles wisely." For instance, when asked where she's from, Wan says "D.C." When asked where she's really from, she says "California," and when questioned where her parents are from, she replies, "Sacramento." She sees these instances as opportunities to "prick at people's brains."

Like Ingrid's family, Wan's parents moved to the U.S. from Taiwan. All of this is important to Ingrid, but her race and family background do not solely define her. "My intention was to write the book as a page-turner, infusing elements of suspense and drama in order to depict

the reality of everyday life in a big city," Wan said.

The novel is as fast-paced as New York City itself, a place where young people are constantly juggling work and romance. Wan said that Ingrid's love interest Murph was her favorite character to write. A ladies' man, Murph is the perfect partner for Ingrid, yet also her foil. Wan's own opinions towards dating are similar to Ingrid's. "Successful career women tend to feel that they can only date someone on par with them or higher," she said, "while men like Murph are entitled to date anyone."

Plot twists and office trysts makes *The Partner Track* seem like a movie, and in fact, Wan is considering adapting it into one. However, for every Lucy Liu or Sandra Oh, Wan said, "there are countless other Asian American actresses consigned to playing prostitutes or having to fake an accent." Wan would love to see an up-and-coming Asian American actress play Ingrid, and she's actually been receiving messages from aspiring actresses expressing interest in the role.

Wan revealed that her next novel will deal with how race, gender and socio-economic class affect people's decision-making process. She says she will never write a Joy Luck Club-style novel though she enjoys reading books with themes that deal explicitly with Asian heritage.

"It is rare for anyone, especially a first-generation Asian American to pursue the idea of doing whatever they love to do," Wan said. "There's an expectation that your parents worked hard so you should find a 'real' job and writing is so unstable although this is changing with the millennial generation."