

INTERSECTIONS RADIO

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TRANSCRIPT

SARIKA MEHTA: Thank you for tuning into the November episode of Intersections Radio, the show where we geek out on all things intersectionality. Today's episode is thinking about the feeling of having a passport without a country. That is, having identities that sometimes don't seem to fit anywhere. And today, I have two wonderful guests on the show. Both are debut novelists. Celeste Ng is the author of the New York Times bestseller, *Everything I Never Told You*. And Sarah Novic is the author of the powerful *Girl At War*. And finally, we close with another great deaf South Asian American story, again from Smita Kothari. She shares her first days in the US with us. It's a packed show so let's get to it. I'm Sarika Mehta, and this is Intersections Radio.

Celeste Ng is a writer from Cambridge, Massachusetts, and published her debut novel last year. The book is called *Everything I Never Told You*, and it's the story of a mixed race family in a small town in Ohio in the 70s. The story begins with a tragedy, and uncovers the history, secrets, and decisions that ultimately make up who we all are. I spoke with Celeste Ng back in June about this book, and her experiences of writing about Asian Americans.

Celeste Ng, thank you so much for joining me on Intersections Radio.

CELESTE NG: Thank you so much for having me on, it's really a pleasure.

SARIKA MEHTA: Talk a little bit about yourself, and how your background feeds into your writing.

CELESTE NG: So, I'm of Chinese American descent. My parents immigrated from Hong Kong in the 1960s, and my sister and I were born here in the states. And, we lived all of my life in areas that really didn't have much of an Asian population, so I was born in the suburbs of Pittsburgh, and then when I was about 10, we moved to the suburbs of Cleveland, Ohio, and there's diversity in both those cities in terms of black and white, but not much of an Asian population. And so for a really long time, the only Asian people that I knew were people that I was related to, and so I've always felt that I'm approaching Chinese culture from sort of an outside perspective.

I felt like I grew up at a distance from my family's culture, because I didn't speak Cantonese, which is the dialect of Chinese that my family speaks. You know, I didn't know a lot of the rituals, and the sort of cultural things that you're, you know, you sort of pick up, just sort of through osmosis. I didn't have a lot of that, and so I've, I wanted to explore that sort of distance and that sort of feeling of having a foot in two different cultures or maybe even more, in the novel. So that's some of what I tend to explore in my work.

SARIKA MEHTA: Absolutely, that speaks a lot to the story, the family in the story is mixed race, it's half Chinese and half American. I mean, both are American. But it's --

CELESTE NG: Thank you for making that distinction, actually, because that's something that I often see, where they say, oh the father's Chinese and the mother is American, and I go, well, wait, wait, American is a nationality, you know. The father is Chinese American and the mother is a white

American.

SARIKA MEHTA: Right, exactly.

CELESTE NG: So I actually am very glad that you made that.

SARIKA MEHTA: What's striking is that it starts from this tragedy, you know, it starts from the place that, the middle daughter is dead and they don't know that yet, and the story goes into these memories and these hopes and dreams and fears. Actually, can you talk more about the book, because I am always so worried about giving away spoilers, so I think that it's better if you talk about it.

CELESTE NG: All right, sure. So, as you said, the novel takes place in the 1970s, 1977. And, it focuses on this mixed race family, the Lee family. So the father, James, is a Chinese American, and the mother, Marilyn, is a white woman who grew up in Virginia, and they got married in the 50s at the time when interracial marriage was still illegal in some parts of the country. But, it was legal where they were in Massachusetts, and they have three children. And when the novel opens, the middle child, whose name is Lydia, she's 16, and she's the favorite child in the family, is not in her room. And the family soon finds out that she's drowned, and they find her body in the local lake of their community, their small town in Ohio where they're the only Asian people.

And that sort of reveals a web of secrets that the family` has been keeping, and that they're going to have to sort of grapple with if they're going to overcome this tragedy. And so, as you said, there's a little bit of a, you know, there's a mystery involved in this story as to how did we get to this place. But it's also really a family story, that's really closely tied to sort of the things that the parents -- each of the parents experienced in their youth, growing up, and then the ways that sort of shaped how they raised their family and how these three children have grown up.

SARIKA MEHTA: As we were saying before, from the background that you grew up with and the experiences you had, I see how that feeds a little bit into the story. But what I'm curious about is, what compelled you to start from this point of such a terrible tragedy in this family?

CELESTE NG: I have always been interested in writing about loss. One of my writing teachers said that writers tend to write about the things that scare them the most. And so for him, he had been happily married for, you know, thirty-something years and he had these grown children, his stories were always about missing children or couples getting divorced or splitting up.

And, for me, I think one of the things that I fear the most is losing someone that I love very deeply, and so I started off with this small seed of a story. It came from an anecdote that my husband told me about when he was a boy. When he was about 7 or 8, a childhood friend of his pushed his own little sister into a lake. And I've since met this person and he's perfectly lovely and the sister was pulled out and was fine. But that little kernel of the story is sort of where that plot element started, this image of a girl falling into the water, and how did she get, where were their parents? What did that say about the relationship that she had with her brother and her family?

So that was where that plot element came in. But, as I started to write more about the family, I started to get a sense of what the dynamics of the family were, and sort of what the make-up of the family was, and realized that I was writing about an interracial family that had sort of very differing views of the world, based on where they had come from.

SARIKA MEHTA: So, it's been in process since 2006, I mean, that's a really long time.

CELESTE NG: Yeah.

SARIKA MEHTA: Does the final product that we are reading in, that's on bookshelves, does that at all mirror what you started with?

CELESTE NG: That's such an interesting question. It's, in a lot of ways it's very different. Structurally, it's quite different. I don't know how wonky you want me to get about writing, but, the first drafts I had were told sort of from individual character's points of view. So it was still in the third person, but there would be, in one section we'd follow the mother around for a while, and we would only get access to her thoughts and what she was doing. And then there'd a, you know, white space, and we'd get the father's point of view for a while. We'd follow him around and get his thoughts. And, I stuck with that sort of viewpoint switching for quite a while, and I eventually realized that the reader needed to be able to see kind of everybody's thoughts at once.

So there was a point of view change that came in very very late in the process. And, likewise, I played around a lot with the structure of the book. You know, do I tell a lot of the past and then do a big chunk of the present story? Do I switch back and forth? How do I weave this together? And so, the original manuscript and the book that we've got now are quite different from each other in terms of crafting, the point of view, and structure, scope, that kind of thing. But the story itself has stayed fairly consistent. The sort of major things that happen in the story, that the daughter in the family is the favorite and she's drowned, that there are these things from the parents' past that are really sort of driving the story, and that effect what happens in the present -- those story elements, and the basic arc of each character, has stayed basically the same.

So, it's a yes and no, I guess, is the best answer.

SARIKA MEHTA: No, of course, I understand. Did you have any intention, any kind of, you know, political bend with your book, or did it just kind of happen organically? Because there are moments in the book that speak to historical events. Obviously it takes place in the 70s, and how this effects racial minorities. But I was just curious how that, how you approached that in your writing.

CELESTE NG: Yeah, I had never thought of myself as a political person or someone who has, you know, who writes to make a point. So, in the novel, it came out really organically. I think if you'd asked me before I started writing the novel, was I ever going to write a novel that involves Asian Americans, I would have said probably not.

SARIKA MEHTA: Oh really?

CELESTE NG: Because, I really sort of -- yeah, because I sort of grew up at a distance from that culture, as I said, and I never felt like I had the expertise or the insider knowledge to really do it justice and to write about it properly. And so, in short stories that I've written, and even I think in this novel, the characters also are a little bit at a distance from that culture. So I wrote a short story, for example, about a Chinese girl who was adopted by a white mother, and her going to college and trying to sort of navigate her relationship to being Chinese, because she's ethnically Chinese but she doesn't know anything about the culture.

And so, you know, I've always written at a little bit of a distance, and this culture that I grew up in,

honestly is really very much sort of white suburban culture. That was sort of where, the area that I was born in. But, as you said, I think as the book has developed and has it's sort of made it way out into the world, I've found talking about those issues has become a lot more important to me, because now I realize, you know, I do identify as an Asian American writer, and these are issues that I -- are really important to me, and that I really want to talk about.

The way that the ethnicity came into the book really was sort of organic. I started writing about this family, and I wasn't even really picturing them. I wasn't thinking about their backgrounds, and a professor of mine who was reading the very early pages said, you know, what's their ethnicity? Where did they come from? And I started thinking about it, and I realized that, if this was sort of a mixed couple, that that explained a lot of the issues that they had, both with each other and with their own past, that it seemed to click into place.

So it really came, for me, out of the characters, but I guess where did the characters come from? They come from me, and from the things that my brain is thinking about. So that sort of speaking out about cultural issues and politics I think has started to come out of me, too.

SARIKA MEHTA: I mean, as I was reading it, and seeing, like what you were talking about, the multiple perspectives of each character at the same time, it really was very touching, just because, we think about how we grew up and where we grew up, and the decisions maybe our families made that we did or did not like. And of course there's a maturity that comes with that. But I just, I found it very touching as somebody who also grew up in suburbia, in a not very diverse suburbia, to immigrant parents. So I really appreciated your writing. Is there anything else on the horizon, are you working on another project right now?

CELESTE NG: I am. I am starting another novel. It's on pause for right now while I'm on book tour, as we're talking now I'm sort of wrapping up the end of book tour, so it's been three weeks of traveling pretty much one city per day, so it's been a lot. And I gave myself permission to not work on the book for a while. But I'm eager to get back into writing mode. I think it's going to be a book that is going to be set in my home town, which is Shaker Heights, Ohio, which is a little suburb on the east side of Cleveland, and is very nice, despite I think what most people tend to think about Cleveland. The images that come to mind often are not kind ones, but Shaker was a lovely place. It was -- there were a lot of trees, it was very progressive, it was fairly affluent, it was very diverse, and very consciously so, at least in terms of black and white, it was something that has been very important to the community, that it be fairly integrated and that it, that diversity was an important thing.

But, what comes along with that I think is also a certain amount of fixation on how things appear from the outside. And so the example that I have been giving, that must at some point work its way into the novel, is that on garbage day you're not allowed to bring your garbage to the curb. You have to keep it in the back, because putting your garbage on the curb makes the street look messy. And then the city has these sort of miniature garbage trucks, that are, if you picture a golf cart that can go really fast. They drive down every driveway and they pick up the garbage in the back and they bring it out to the big garbage truck at the front. So there's never garbage in front of the house.

SARIKA MEHTA: Well, talk about never airing your dirty laundry. Goodness.

CELESTE NG: Well, that's it, exactly. I feel like there's such a metaphorical possibility there, in the having to keep all the sort of dirty, nasty stuff hidden. Because certainly there is plenty of that in any community. So, I think this story is again going to be a family story, centuring on a family that lives in

this community, and then a mother and daughter who come from out of town and who have some secrets in their past, and the ways that they sort of get entangled with each other. And I don't know yet to what extent, you know, issues of race or culture will go into this book, but I suspect that they're going to find their way in, in some kind of organic way, because those are things that now are on my mind.

SARIKA MEHTA: Celeste Ng, thank you so much for taking the time to chat with me, and I wish you the best on the rest of your book tour.

CELESTE NG: Thank you so much, it was really a pleasure to talk with you.

SARIKA MEHTA: That was author Celeste Ng, and the book is *Everything I Never Told You*. I'm Sarika Mehta, and you're listening to *Intersections Radio*.

Sara Novic is a writer from New York. She recently published her debut novel, *Girl At War*, an inside look at the experiences of the Serbo-Croatian War, from the perspective of a 10 year old Croatian girl, and her post-war life in the US. Sara is a gifted writer who recently graduated from Columbia University with an MFA in Creative Writing and Translation Studies. Sara happens to also be deaf, so her relationship with language is unique, and particular. While there are no deaf characters in her novel, she feels kindred spirits with the protagonist, Anna.

I spoke with Sara back in June. In fact, our interview was over Skype, in American Sign Language, and Jenn Chavez provided voice-over for this interview. Sara and I talked about the inspiration behind this particular story, our common geeky love of language, and her strange relationship with the audio version of her book.

To begin, Sara talked about the Serbo-Croatian war as the backdrop to her story.

SARA NOVIC [voiceover provided by Jenn Chavez]: I grew up here in the US, but I also lived in Croatia for a bit, where we have some family friends. That's actually why I started writing the book. Specifically, this one time I visited after my high school graduation, and I stayed there for a long time, and I met a lot of people. And they would tell me about the war in Croatia, and about their experiences. Well, I always tend to write down stories and draw and make up these stories or whatever, so when people in Croatia were telling me about the war, I began documenting them. And soon enough I had this massive collection.

When I got back to the US, I went off to college. And in college, I was meeting all these new people, and I realized nobody had any idea about the war. I was a bit surprised and kind of agitated by it, so I started writing about it. I wrote a short story while I was taking a creative writing class. I'd never done any creative writing before, so I thought, oh I'll experiment with the short story. And my professor was really supportive and really liked it. And, I felt it was really important that people know about the Balkans, about their situation, and so the story just grew and grew, and that's how I started writing the book. Basically, by accident.

SARIKA MEHTA: We experience the war through the protagonist Anna. Sara Novic describes Anna for us, and how she relates to the character.

SARA NOVIC: Yes, definitely. When people ask me I relate to Anna, there's a sense of, where's my home? What is my language? Who are my people? You know? I experienced some semblance of this

during my stay with family friends in Croatia. But I feel I'm more in my everyday life here. For example, when there's a communication breakdown, or sometimes I feel like I want to express -- for me, ASL is the best language for everyday communication. At the same time, English, written English, I can fully control and I can choose the specific vocabulary that I want. I'm a writer, so I'm picky, and I always have language in my mind. That sense, that feels like two identities. That's one place where I think both Anna and I try to analyze the meaning of it.

SARIKA MEHTA: One of my favorite scenes in the book is when Anna is trying to manage reading signs in the Slovenian language, which is similar to Croatian but different enough that it's so-called "out of reach." I asked Sara to talk about this.

SARA NOVIC: Sometimes I think the way to write good characters, at least I hope good characters, is by incorporating real life experiences with the character. Everyone can understand those feelings, whether it's feeling loneliness or feeling confusion, and then, layering those feelings into the character's experiences. And that's why fiction writing works. That's the first example that I've seen, Slovenian language written on signs. You feel frustrated, while you're driving or whatever. The feeling that the language is just out of reach. But I suppose, I mean, obviously I'm a bit of a nerd. I'm a language nerd. I'm always thinking about language.

So, the idea of the old family and the new family. I think about the way language forces you to express yourself. Even if that's not what you want to say. Anna doesn't want to make that distinction. I recently wrote a piece about how English forces you, well, English forces me to say things I don't want to say, being deaf, like, "Oh, I heard about that." Maybe it's innocuous, maybe it's not a big deal, but it's still not specifically what I wanted to say. So, that feeling is incorporated into Anna.

What I mean is that I don't like that "to hear," in English, often means "to understand," because then deaf becomes the opposite of that. You see it in the papers when people say, the politician is deaf to the community's values. It's frustrating for me, hearing indicates understanding or empathy. You know the expression "I hear you." Whereas, the underlying meaning for deaf is stupid, or to neglect something. That sets up a bad, it creates an inequality.

It depends. I mean, if it's just casual conversation, it's fine. Most people I deal with on a daily basis are hearing anyway. They'll say, Oh I hear that. Okeh, whatever. I'm more irritated if I see this in the media. Like, newspapers or the internet, when it's a prominent headline. In fact, that's one of the reasons I started my blog online. I started it as a way for people to have a conversation about deaf things online. So I guess it depends on the situation. If it gets buried, it's fine, leave it alone. On the other hand, if I think it's worth it, I'll call it out.

SARIKA MEHTA: Sara then talked about why she chose to write a novel instead of nonfiction, since she's very much wanted to talk about the war.

SARA NOVIC: Yeah. I mean, the book itself is a work of fiction. But part of the reason that I started writing was so that people would at least become curious about what had happened in that area. So, the book is a way to fit with the historical timeline of the war. Obviously, the characters and their circumstances are made up, but the events could have happened according to the time period. I did that through a lot of research, and I asked a lot of people for stories, and, I mean, I don't think I was too obtrusive. I started writing because people were telling me about the war.

I think people wanted the outside world to know about the war, especially here in the US or western

Europe. I think the people in Croatia wanted them to know and understand the conflict. Because the way the media portrays it, it's not that black and white, if at all. So, in that way, it was easy. People wanted to talk.

I think people gave me a lot of stories that were true in the book. Basically, I researched where the military was based, which roads were open, which ones had closed down, the where, the when, the how, all of that. I feel it's important, especially because this war was recent. It was only twenty years ago. I wanted people to feel that from the research, you know? I wanted people to feel the real story, but at the same time not be bored. So that was a balance I was trying to make happen, to make sure outsiders could understand what happened, but at the same time not be bored by a list of facts.

SARIKA MEHTA: I was especially curious how the Serbo-Croatian community here in the US had received her book.

SARA NOVIC: In fact, recently I attended this Croatian embassy event here in DC. I think that was the second event they held for the book. I was really nervous. But I think it went really well. I gave a talk, there was a Q & A, and then afterwards, well, we met the ambassador's family. His son had read the book, that's why they invited me. That kind of support was just incredible. Afterwards, I met a man who had lived through the war, and he told me, as I was reading your book, I felt there was a black spot on my heart. Over time, it grew and grew, and suddenly, it disappeared after reading your book. I guess he identified strongly with the character. That was the best compliment I could get from Croatian readers. They want to support the book. They want to see the story travel far and wide.

SARIKA MEHTA: Over the summer, the audio book version of *Girl At War* was released. And again, Sara Novic is deaf and doesn't really have access to the audio book of her own novel. So I asked her about her experience with the audio book.

SARA NOVIC: Yeah, I mean, the audio book is weird. I think so, anyway. But, I mean, I finished the book, it was published, and then translated, or transformed, into something that I can't understand at all. I mean, I guess it's like a different language translation, but it's impossible to learn or to understand the audio book. But, the audio book is cool, it's cool. It's a little weird. But maybe that's part of the experience.

I mean, when they were making the audio book, they emailed me some questions, like, how do you think Anna talks? Do you think she has an accent? What would she sound like? I told them that I didn't think she would have an accent. I actually think she would work hard to try to mask it. So we went back and forth about what her voice might sound like. But really, I don't know what happened at the end of it at all. So, I mean, I guess it's strange. But it's the experience of the author. You write the book, it's released, and then people read the books in their homes, and I don't have any control over that. You know? It's kind of a similar experience. The book is independent of me now. It's weird, but it's out there.

SARIKA MEHTA: And as I mentioned earlier, Sara is also a translator. I was curious if there's a translation of the book out yet, and if she had any interest in translating her own work.

SARA NOVIC: I'm done with this book. No, no. But, I think it would be neat to have a conversation, as someone who translates, yes. But with translation, it would be good to have a conversation with someone who's not only skilled in translation, but also understands its potential impact, and incorporates that into the book.

SARIKA MEHTA: That was author Sara Novic, and the book is *Girl At War*. This interview was originally in American Sign Language, and you can see the captioned videos of the interview online at IntersectionsRadio.wordpress.com. I'm Sarika Mehta, and you're listening to Intersections Radio.

Finally, we close with another great story from Smita Kothari. Vidyut Latay provided voiceover. Smita is a deaf South Asian American who lives in Maryland. She shares her first days in the US.

SMITA KOTHARI [voiceover by Vidyut Latay]: Hello. My name is Smita. I'm going to tell you about my first days here in America. As we descended and landed at the airport, I went into the passport office to show them my documents as a first time visitor. And the people there could sign and would communicate using pen and paper. I thought that was really cool. I then walked over to meet my husband and his father.

We were at Newark Airport in New Jersey. And when we exited the airport, I looked all around and saw rows upon rows of cars. I couldn't figure out where were all the people. There wasn't a soul in sight. I asked my husband, where are all the people. And he suggested, maybe inside the office buildings working. It was afternoon. But I thought surely, at least a few people would be walking around. But nobody at all? It felt like everyone had died. So that was odd but interesting.

And then, when we got into the car and drove the long way home, and my husband and his father would simultaneously sign and drive, and it kind of scared me. I really had never experienced that before. Whenever my dad would drive, we just sat quietly. But I guess people can sign and drive at the same time.

Driving home to this small city, still nobody was on the road. Absolutely nothing. Not even any shops along the way. I couldn't help but think that there should be at least a few along the way. Not to mention, all the houses along the road were painted identically, and still, no people around. Everyone's doors were kept closed. It was puzzling, because in my country, in India, we keep our doors open. We greet our neighbors and stand around and chat for a bit.

Anyways, we entered my in-laws house, and meeting the family, I noticed their behavior was rather formal. I just wasn't used to it. So for the first few days, it felt a bit awkward. But as I got to know them, I came to know their habits and I adapted as well. Another time, while we were driving, I saw the toll booth up ahead. We had to pay, and the toll booth woman started speaking with my husband. He told her he's deaf, and that he signs, and I was so surprised and amazed at how easy it was to communicate.

When I first began meeting my husband's deaf friends, they all were very friendly. But they all communicated using American Sign Language, which was lost on me. I didn't know it. So I used to sit there just not understanding anything. And my husband would give me a synopsis of what they were talking about. That's how I was able to begin picking up the language. To this day, I'm socializing more and meeting more people, and that's my story. Thank you.

SARIKA MEHTA: That's it for Intersections Radio. Thank you so much to my guests, Celeste Ng, Sara Novic, and Smita Kothari. And special thanks to Jenn Chavez and Vidyut Latay for lending your voices. Catch Intersections Radio the first Friday of every month at 11. And for podcasts, archives, transcripts, and videos, visit IntersectionsRadio.wordpress.com. And join our community at [Facebook.com/IntersectionsRadio](https://www.facebook.com/IntersectionsRadio). I'm Sarika Mehta. Thanks for listening.