

Dear Ms. Ng,

There is a great irony in the writing of this story. Each character is described in such detail and so I empathize with almost everyone, some I didn't expect. But at the same time I watched those same friends and family, bitterly divided, I witnessed the devastating harm it brought. It made me think, "Why?"

To use your own analogy, it is one thing to see a fire, but to understand it is to see its sparks. It is so powerful that it can work even for an Elena Richardson, the wealthy, suburban mother of four that we all know and tolerate. I'm not even an adult, yet I still felt the humanity of her story. Being raised in Shaker, trying to live life according to a plan, she lived with the fear of taking risks and the sacrifices she chose to make. It doesn't mean I like her, but understanding Elena was something I could do.

I understood them because I am the omniscient reader, but they are mere humans. Their differences will have consequences and sometimes they have to make a choice. It never hit me quite as hard as in the trial of custody between Bebe Chow and Linda McCollough. Should the child go to the single biological mother or the married wealthy mother? And while it did divide people, especially Izzy and her family, something surprising happened to me. Ed Lim happened to me. When he talked about how impossible it is to find Asian American dolls for his child, I felt so seen. I didn't have to go as far to empathize as I did with Mrs. Richardson because that sort of experience was felt in a way in my own shoes. I never realized I was underrepresented until I was represented.

You made me happy in that moment. It made me think, you, Celeste Ng, were on my side. Little did I know that a flaming heart would turn into ash. How dare you? You make me feel good one page and then you slap me in the face? Linda McCollough wins custody of the baby.

I had many reasons to be on Bebe's side. The core of it was that it was simply unfair and cruel towards Bebe because no matter what she did, there really was no way for her to win. How can a single illegal immigrant mother ever compare to the wealthy nuclear family?

Earlier I wondered why were people so divided and a little later mentioned the sparks of a flame. My answer is the one thing so many characters share: the setting, Shaker Heights, Ohio, in the 1990s. It was the accelerant of the fires I pondered for days. Shaker Heights is a pressure for conformity and monolithic good. The reason I empathized with so many of your characters is because seeing the pressure take effect and hurt and divide people gave me dread. It all started with that duplex, that god awful duplex. An almost irrational rage went over me as the simple explanation that there was only one front door to avoid the stigma for living in an affordable duplex.

Viet Cao 2023

*Little Fires Everywhere* by Cynthia Ng

Stigma? For what? Making slightly less money? Living in anything other than a single family home? The worst part is that it doesn't really progress against prejudice. All it does is mask the problem; people still stigmatize duplexes, they just see them less often. This predisposition towards masking issues over addressing root causes is viscerally enraging.

The environment is the kindling for the sparks that burst into flames, the ones that form people. I wanted to thank you, Ms. Ng. Not for answering every question I raised, but for teaching me to think beyond the status quo and without oversimplification. For a couple of weeks I got to peek at the humanity of everyone navigating a world that tries to manipulate them and the divisions it makes. And maybe, that should change.

Viet Cao