

April 2, 2018

JI STRANGEWAY



Happy Monday everyone! Recently TFF MAG had a chance to chat with queer creative Ji Strangeway to chat bout her newest book "Red as Blue". The book follows the story of a young biracial teen named June Lusparian as she thoughtfully navigates the halls of high school one day at a time.

With a unique, genre-bending style that is sometimes lyrical, sometimes sharp as a razor's edge, and always engaging, Red as Blue, beckons LGBTQ youths and X-gens to beautifully come of age all over again.

What is different and refreshing about the book is that it offers a much more raw and realistic take on the teenage experience in learning how to survive in school and the battle between clans.

Ji Strangeway tackles a variety of relevant, current and very real issues that teenagers (still) face today: suicide, gender identity, love & sexuality, social classes and acceptance.

Do yourself a favor and check out "Red as Blue" ASAP! Enjoy the interview!

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TFF MAG: Tell us about what inspired you to create Red As Blue.

Ji: I had a burning desire to talk about the world I grew up in, which is the dark ages of the mid-1980s when there was a great deal of homophobia and oppression and the difficulty of being "gay."

My story speaks to the GenXers who went through the hardships of being mostly in the closet, sexually and socially repressed. The book also speaks to the youth today who may be struggling with the same issues in some parts of our world. It offers insight to those who are enjoy the freedom they have today--because we took the first arrow for them.

But what inspired me most is the concept of role models and ideals, and how we need them to thrive and to look forward to the future. Notice I use the word "ideals" as opposed to idols. Idols do not necessarily live up to our ideals. Mass media plays a huge role in influencing our minds and shaping society because they dictate social values. Because there were no role models for gays, I had no ideals to live by. And the role models whom I cherished were also wounded because they were too afraid to come out of the closet.

For this reason, the outcast in my story, June Lusparian, wanders in the shadows of her society looking for a place to belong and ends falling for America's most desirable ideal, Beverly, a seemingly well-adjusted cheerleader. Well, maybe the cheerleader is also "questioning?"

I also wanted to shift this paradigm of centuries of obsession with a Romeo & Juliet type of tragedy that plays out in our relationship. We attract this because as gays we experience the pains of unrequited love more starkly than anyone else. And because we sort of expect that, we get used to it and almost crave the pain of rejection. It's highly self-destructive and toxic and I feel that by creating more stories that don't endorse this kind of thing, we learn how to love ourselves and each other properly.

TFF: In the book, you spotlight the fact that your character is half American and half Mexican. What made you want to discuss her experience as a biracial woman? What is it important to you?

Ji: Thank you for address this. June Lusparian is caught between two worlds. A world that is straight when she is not. A world that is violent whereas she hates it. A world that is barren and void of love when she is thirsting for it. So too, she is caught between being Mexican and Armenian. What that equates to is that she doesn't qualify as an "American" therefore, does not have a place in the world.

Her confusion about her race and sense of belonging it worsen by the fact that she is gay. So the biracial aspect is more about her existential homelessness than it is about race.

The race thing draws from my own experience of being a Vietnamese immigrant growing up in a Mexican ghetto in Denver, Colorado. I was oppressed by the Mexicans who hated us but somehow I understood as a kid that they were oppressed by a society that continues to treat them very poorly. The racism towards Mexican as second-class citizens could be felt and in my environment, so they carried a lot of rage. In terms of media, they didn't have role models either. The mass media excluded nearly all of us back the dark ages.

I grew up in a world full of hatred and violence. Out of this my character, June Lusparian was born. I was inspired to make her half-Armenian rather than full Mexican because I didn't want my story to be about race. I didn't make her Asian because the story I needed to tell is neither autobiographical nor about race. It's a much bigger story--race is just one of the many things that can hold us back. The deeper story is about preserving your self-identity--which is a much bigger piece of the pie.

It's not a story about a Mexican girl or an Armenian girl. It is a girl caught in two worlds and rejected because not matter what she does--she is intrinsically different inside. And that is quintessentially how all gays feel all at the time: they can be any race but they are intrinsically different inside.

Most of my friends in LA are Armenian and my closest friend help me choose June's last name, which means "From the Light." June is a dark person because society darkened her. But is a shining light with loads of potential from the outside. This is so true for many youths--and that is the message I want to bring out.

I digress. But the seed inspiration happened when my close friend, Nare, explained to me that although she passes as an American because she's pale skin--she feels incredibly different inside and can't relate to Americans or their values. So I thought June had to be like that--passable as an American but never belonging inwardly.

TFF: What was your experience coming out like?

Ji: I frankly never came out because I never accepted the idea of gay or straight. I knew that love was love--during a time when no else believed that. I loved boys and girls and then just realized that I liked girls better. But I never came out as gay because I never felt a need to declare it, I just never lied or hid it. But being "gay" was pure hell. Even when you don't "come out," strangers took the liberty to call you dyke or lesbian (as though that's a bad word) and this was systematically endorsed as permissible by our culture. So you see, politics that shape societal values plays a huge role in allowing people to hate. When you go through that every day, you start associating your sexual identity as being bad. That's what happens to June in my story.

TFF: What made you want to write about the characters experience while she was in high school?



Ji: Coming of age stories are very dear to me and close to my heart. The high school experience is one where we are really at the top of our game with straddling the line between self-identity and society. It is a place in our lives where we blossom as souls and expressing our truth before we become a robot, or take on a role that would define us by our jobs, education, or who we marry and so on later in life.

I like capturing the lives of teens because it's a period where we truly question authority and being foolishly brilliant and ignorant about everything. There is a freshness to so many "first time" experiences which make everything, especially love, sacred.

Whereas many teen stories treat the high school experience in a juvenile way by depicting teen love as mere crushes and infatuations, this is not the case with Red as Blue and certainly not the case with me. The love that the teens experience in my story is a wake-up call to recognize something much purer and real. At the same time, teens are teens and will be flippant and react poorly to that recognition. That's part of the battle, and the battlefield is High School.

For kids who didn't fit in, going to school is like going off to war. The lessons and ways you learn to cope with life all seem to either go back to the cradle, or back to how you managed high school. For me, Red as Blue has a "Lord of the Flies" feel to it because of how strongly societal values and politics impact and shaped the lives of these kids. I mean, for them to carry so much social hatred and venting through what appears to be bullying--when really it is a mirror of the wounded world.

TFF: You're known for your filmmaking, which is a visual medium. How does that play into your graphic novel?

Ji: For the artwork in Red as Blue, I'm actually more of an art director. Juan Fleites is my collaborator. He's a Mexican illustrator who lives in Yucatan, Mexico.

The art in Red as Blue is different than most graphic novels because my book is a hybrid mixed with prose, a style of my own invention. Each illustration is treated like a portal into an Alice and Wonderland kind of journey into the metaphysical aspect of June and Beverly's world. The illustrations were a way for me to transport the reader deeper into the story the way a film does.

When they say a picture is worth a thousand words, that is what I attempted to do here. Traditional graphic novels can't live up to that because the graphical form happens cover-to-cover. So your eyes sort of go blind to imagery. You're not going to get hit with pages and pages of comic panels and word bubbles with Red as Blue. You get long breaks to relish the images as they appear. The beauty of reading a visual book as opposed to watching a film is that it doesn't happen in real time. It happens in your time.

TFF: Can you tell us a little about the first time you fell for a girl?

OMG. Which first time? I have so many first times...the first time my sister's best friend and I made out at her birthday party during a trip to see a Disney movie when I was only maybe 7 years old? Or the first time I reached puberty and fell for a Southern Baptist Girl who rejected me because well, she's a Southern Baptist Girl? Or the first time I met a real woman--a woman 10 years older than me who taught me that you don't need a penis to appreciate penetration? Falling in love is always first time. It's so beautiful. It is the worst when you see a hot lady and she's 100% straight and you're looking at the wedding ring on her finger--and your heart crushes like glass shattering in slow motion.

TFF: Last question. Name one thing that comes to mind when someone says the word love.

Ji: The eternity of soul in someone's eyes.

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