

The First Two Pages: “Hey Bulldog” by Anjili Babbar

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An Essay by Anjili Babbar

When I started writing “Hey Bulldog,” American academia was laser-focused on “diversity initiatives” in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and the protests that followed. My minority-majority students and I had a number of difficult conversations. On the one hand, this new discourse about diversity and inclusion had made it easier for them to openly discuss systemic racism; on the other, they worried that it had morphed their lived experiences into catch phrases that could be hollowly wielded by performative allies who didn’t really understand those experiences at all. We wondered aloud whether it was more difficult to contend with racism under the burden of silence or of pretense.

The first two pages of the story were initially very different, because I wanted to give a montage of those options, highlighting their dangerous absurdity. “The soundtrack to any traumatic event is the noise of one peripherally involved person being weak very loudly,” it began, as the main character, Serene, silently judged a series of secondary characters for envisioning themselves as the protagonist in *her* story. And because the story involved Serene’s process of

coming to terms with the conditions that created that sort of entitlement, it unrolled backwards, beginning with the climax and proceeding to its origins, step by step.

It was an interesting exercise that helped me to get inside the character's head, but it didn't work for the story, particularly because it became clear that another character, Maddie, would have to become a second central perspective. Both women are essentially unreliable narrators, not because they are dishonest, but because the issues they are contending with—systemic racism, bureaucracy, false allyship, sexual assault—are so complicated and convoluted that it's difficult for any one person to grasp the full context, particularly when she is in the middle of it. By including both of their perspectives, I was able to give a fuller picture of events (though by the end—no spoilers—I think it's clear that even two perspectives can't offer the *entire* picture). Once I rearranged the story, I realized that it was actually *about* perspective, and specifically, the way that the narratives we create to make sense of people and events, based on the limited information available to us, effectively strand us in parallel but distinct realities.

So the story, as published, begins at the beginning for Serene, who starts her academic journey fully aware of her own talent as a scholar and writer, but equally aware that, as a woman of color, her opportunities are endangered by nepotism and bigotry:

When she started in the Honors English program at Brentworth College, Serene Jacques had no illusions about becoming a tenure-

track professor at some grand R1 school. Those jobs were cherries that went to people of a different class and color, academics with the connections and participation trophies to make their actual *merit* irrelevant.

Serene suspected that the other students in the program didn't think she belonged. The mean girls certainly didn't invite her to their parties, and she once overheard one of them whisper "diversity candidate" as she entered the Renaissance Lit classroom.

Never mind that the mean girls' papers were slogging rehashes of tropes handed down by decades of tired old white men. They had broad synthetic smiles, asses that announced they had time to devote to the gym instead of slinging burgers after class, and daddies with grad-school besties on the college board. They were all but guaranteed to wind up teaching the next generation of students to be as brutally average as themselves.

Serene's fear that the choice jobs in her field are usually "cherries that went to people of a different class and color, academics with the connections and participation trophies to make their actual *merit* irrelevant" is validated shortly afterward when she learns that Maddie Corbin, "the only professor of color in the department," is regarded with suspicion by her colleagues. The department chair, who notices Serene's talent and offers to take her under her wing, warns her:

"Don't affiliate yourself with hostile people on the margins. Nobody likes a troublemaker—and whatever they pretend, nobody likes woke-talk or self-victimization."

This is where the dissonant narratives begin. Serene and Maddie are contending with essentially the same core issue—the way that women of color are treated in academia (and in the world more generally)—but they are divided by a generational gap in discourse and experience. Serene views Maddie's cool

professionalism as a by-product of success that places her at an emotional distance from the struggles she discusses in academic terms: “Corbin was fish-cold, all woke ideas and no emotion. It wasn’t strange that she rubbed people the wrong way.” When we get Maddie’s perspective at the end of the second page, however, we discover that her outward emotional control is a form of self-protection:

The light of her iPhone was a beacon in Maddie Corbin’s dim apartment. There was little warmth in the brick walls, antique steel barn door, and candelabras collected from a dozen countries, all arranged like feathers in a nest, building blocks in anticipation of a life well spent. But a show apartment was of little use without anyone to show it to. The smell of sauteed garlic and mirepoix and the clatter of dishes punctuated by laughter from the apartment next door made Maddie’s solitude torture.

Any woman in academia—but particularly a childless woman of color—could expect to be taken advantage of. Her students deluged her with emails, cataloguing their anxieties in multi-paragraph monologues and telling her what she *would* do: “You *will* give me an extension on my paper,” they demanded. And her colleagues were no different: “You *will* join this additional committee, because Noah and Jenna and James are too busy driving their kids to soccer practice.” And any objection from her, any expression of emotion, would see her labelled angry or hysterical.

In Maddie’s experience, the price of academic success has been a discriminatory workload that allows for no personal time, and advocating for herself has inevitably resulted in pushback and stereotyping. She has learned the hard way that addressing systemic prejudice in theory is tolerated but pointing it out in practice is another story altogether.

Although Maddie is “the only person...who had really made time to discuss *ideas* with her,” Serene’s misinterpretation of the professor’s demeanor leaves her vulnerable and in search of an ally. The department chair seems poised to help, even if some of her recommendations sound like a throwback to the 1950s. In addition to her admonition about “woke-talk,” the chair, with her “signature tight skirt and stilettos,” has some pretty narrow ideas about gender roles and presentation:

“And let’s do something to get you looking more ... professional,” Russell added, eyeing Serene’s Doc Martens. “Looks shouldn’t matter, but it’s a man’s world, isn’t it? Trying to be pretty won’t kill you.”

Nestled within Serene’s very astute reflections on what it means to be a woman and a person of color in her field, comments like these seem palpably discordant. I wanted readers to question whether there are still people who think and talk like this in the ivory tower—the answer is yes, by the way—and to immediately mistrust the chair. Her motives for helping Serene seem questionable. Is she trying to situate herself as a white savior figure? Does she view Serene as a threat to a patriarchal structure that she finds comforting?

There are other possibilities, of course, but they aren’t introduced until much later, because, in a story about the limits of perception, it’s important for the readers’ perception to be limited, too. There is no denouement in human interactions; we only see what we can (or choose to) see. In “Hey Bulldog,” this

sets the stage for one series of traumatic events, two different narratives about those events, and multiple explanations for what goes wrong—and why.

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Anjili Babbar is a writer, professor, and scholar of Irish and British literature, with a particular focus on crime fiction and criminality. She has a Ph.D. from the University of Rochester and M.A.s from the University of Rochester and McGill University. She has published on topics ranging from Irish crime fiction to representations of Irish folklore in popular culture. Her new book, *Finders: Justice, Faith, and Identity in Irish Crime Fiction* (Syracuse University Press), is an extensive survey of Irish crime writers and the ways in which they subvert literary traditions and genre conventions. “Hey Bulldog” is her first published fiction.