



## Vickie Nam

**Yell-Oh Girls!**  
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### The Story Behind the Book

"Why bother stressing out over things you can't change? That's life, so just deal." Alex's attitude toward most of the social crises that occurred throughout adolescence was that if there was no way in hell he could fix something, he'd just ignore it. Although his philosophy clashed with my own, it was something I learned to accept over the years. After all, he was one of the only Asian kids I'd grown up with since I was a toddler. Alex's phlegmatic responses bewildered and vexed me, especially as I began confiding in him about the critical observations I was making about the predominantly white, conservative suburb we lived in, which, in my opinion, was also a moist, dark breeding place for prejudice. I could tell from the way his voice dropped, and from the slow sigh that always accompanied a shaking head of disapproval that he thought, as usual, I was being dramatic. I should stop obsessing about imagined "differences" - racial and cultural differences that, Alex said, were apparent only to me,

and not to anyone around me. I couldn't understand why Alex refused to acknowledge the injustices, which, to me, were so plainly obvious. I wondered why we didn't see the world from similar perspectives. But I quickly realized my error. *Alex and I didn't have to share the same worldview, just because we were both Asian.* Later, listening to other Asian American girls tell their stories in our anthology, this idea would resonate with unforgettable force. My mother always made time for me. She heard me talk endlessly about how much my teachers hated me, and that I wanted to move to Florida or California or anywhere but where we lived. When I was finished, she offered advice that was meant to assuage but only left me asking more questions. My mother told me about the challenges she faced as a first-generation immigrant - and that not being the most popular girl in the school wouldn't be the last crises I'd ever face in my life. Her arguments were impossible to refute. There was so little I knew about my parents' past, and so much about their lives that peaked my curiosity. When I attempted to talk to them about their family history, or memories of immigration, I felt like I was paddling in quicksand. Most of the time, I thought that they were far removed from what I was going through at school. I wished there were a person who could challenge my views without discounting them. I wanted someone to listen to me, to give me insight, and to validate my emotions. I didn't want to consult peers or teachers with my problems for fear that they, like my friend Alex, would dismiss me as some angry little Asian girl. The desire to reconcile feelings of alienation and self-hatred grew, and I became interested in embarking on a journey toward gaining a fuller understanding of my identity. In college, I decided to take a closer look at my high school photo album. In every photo that was ever taken of me in high school, I'm smiling. I revisited the questions I asked myself as a teenager - the most important one being, what feelings and experiences were masked by that picture-perfect, model-minority smile? The album chronicles a dreadful decade of fashion and beauty trends manifesting an underdeveloped, Asian, female body. In seventh grade, I wore *Cover Girl* pearlescent, electric blue and purple eyeliner in a style that, according to instructions I found in a beauty bonus insert in my teen magazine, would "widen and accentuate almond-shaped eyes." In eighth grade, a botched iron-rod spiral perm obliterated my fantasy of becoming *L'Oreal* spokesmodel Andie McDowell. In ninth, a short wedge hairdo meant to emulate Mary Stuart Masterson's in *Some Kind of Wonderful*, earned me the nickname "UFO Girl". In tenth, my mother cringed when she saw me wearing hazel colored contacts. They made me look moo-soh-wo - in Korean, "scary" - like a lion or a lizard. In eleventh, Sun-In lightening solution turned my hair orange, and I never left the house without wearing a too-puffy, size 32A, push-up bra. My best friend, Amy, who is Irish-American, was also insecure about her appearance, but I think our high-school photos tell disparate stories about how we coped with our physical flaws. Pictures of Amy tell of a girl who felt like a nerd wearing clunky, plastic-framed glasses. Amy cursed her dull, frizzy, brown hair, and her pale, fleshy body. I was equally unsatisfied with my image, but not just because I thought I looked brainiac or fat. I was trapped in my "outsider" skin, marked for life. No amount of lightening, tightening, or whitening would transform me into the beautiful, glossy girls in *Seventeen*, or even the popular "It" girls at school, whose blond or brunette ponytails swished from side to side in the hallways. The stories, poems, and essays appearing in *Yell-Oh Girls!* starts a lively dialogue about issues of identity, culture, and growing up through the perspectives of Asian American girls - issues rarely addressed in the mainstream magazines targeting American teen girls. In five months I generated over 500 submissions from Asian American girls from across the U.S. and Canada. And with the help of a friend, I launched a Web site as an interactive accessory to the book. I prompted potential contributors with a list of introspective questions designed to trigger a writing frenzy and, to my delight, I received letters and submissions from people who were eager to get involved and wanted to know more about the anthology project. Girls from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and geographic locations joined our discussions about a range of topics - interracial dating, dual identities, family conflicts and relationships, sexuality, friendship, political activism. Later, I sought pre-published and original essays from women whom we considered mentors, and decided that a "mentor essay" would be placed at the end of each chapter. This special feature would accomplish two important tasks. It would emphasize the importance of connection between girls and women, and make visible some successful, charismatic, Asian women whose contributions to literature, activism, and politics would inspire girls to follow their personal and professional dreams. The book includes insightful essays by revered writers and organizers such as Phoebe Eng, Nora Okja Keller, Elaine Kim, Patsy and Wendy Mink, Janice Mirikitani, Lois-Ann Yamanaka, and Helen Zia - all critical links between young and mature perspectives. Once again, my mailbox is brimming with e-mails. The inquiries are from girls who eagerly await the release of the anthology ("When's it coming out again?"). They are girls who are excited that somebody they know will be among the featured contributors. Also in the mix are girls who are trying to bridge the generation and communication gaps in their relationship with their parents. Girls who are getting up the courage to tell their friends that calling them "China Doll" or "Oriental" isn't okay. Girls who want to find creative ways of resisting the pervasive stereotype that suggests Asian women are silent, docile, sexually subservient, exotic. Girls who are overwhelmed by the conflicting roles they are expected to perform at home and at school. Girls who are learning to accept and even love themselves - their bodies, their parents, their cultural uniqueness - in the context of Eurocentric, mainstream ideals reinforced in American culture. And, most obvious are the girls, who, in the process of respecting the demands of people in their lives, are searching for their own distinct voice. In *Yell-Oh Girls!* nearly seventy girls unite to challenge the idea that youth are passive receptacles to the mass media, and parental and peer pressure. Wielding the power of the pen, these contributors are the warrior women of tomorrow, combating stereotypes, recovering untold stories, and taking the initiative to change the world. At the heart of the book is the belief that, as Asian American girls, *our voices matter.* —Vickie Nam