

A Conversation with Katherine Lin, author of *You Can't Stay Here Forever*

What is *You Can't Stay Here Forever* about?

Soon after twenty-eight-year-old Ellie Huang's husband, Ian, is killed in a car accident, she discovers he was cheating on her with one of her colleagues at her prestigious San Francisco law firm. In a rare act of impulse, Ellie uses Ian's life insurance payout to book an extended stay at the renowned Hotel du Cap-Eden-Roc. She brings along her best friend Mable Chou, who has her own reasons for wanting to run away, too. While basking in obscene luxury, Ellie and Mable fall in with an attractive and sophisticated American couple. But as poolside chats roll into wine-soaked dinners (lots and lots of them), Ellie and Mable find it impossible to ignore their lives back home. All of their demons are right there with them in the South of France, and there is nowhere else to run.

But what is it really about?

I was interested in the charged complications of female friendship, the slippery nature of marriage and monogamy, and the discord of mother daughter relationships—all from the eyes of an Asian American woman struggling to find her footing in the early years of adulthood. I also found myself grappling with topics my friends and I talk about all the time: ambition, the allures and limits of capitalism, and the interplay of race and privilege.

After her husband Ian's sudden death and the discovery of his affair, it would appear that Ellie's decision to run away to the south of France with her best friend is a brilliant idea. Is it?

I think so. Of course, Ellie is trying to run away from problems that can only be solved head-on: how her desire for prestige has left her with an unsatisfying career; how she struggles to define herself outside of her close personal relationships; how unhappy she is with her life. But I don't think Ellie would've ever found clarity had she never left on the trip with Mable. Her time away causes a reckoning that sheds a blazing light on her entire life.

Ellie and Mable end up finding that there really is no escape from reality—including the burden of having to navigate the world as a minority. Can you talk more about the part race played in your book?

Ellie and Mable's experience of traveling is necessarily affected by the fact that they are traveling as Asian American women. Race plays into the way other people perceive them of course, but it also works the other way around—after a lifetime of heightened awareness of the spaces they're occupying, Ellie and Mable are primed to be astute, critical observers of everything and everyone around them. So Ellie can go from pristine poolside service to experiencing garden variety—but nonetheless gutting—racism in the same day. And no matter how many celebrities ate at the restaurant Ellie and Mable find themselves in, fully relaxing into their glamorous setting is impossible. Privilege, class, and power are always top of mind.

The plot is set into motion by Ellie's husband Ian, but the heart of the novel is about the relationship between Ellie and her best friend, Mable. What are you saying about the significance of female friendship?

I've found that platonic friendships can be some of the most influential—and complicated—relationships in life, especially for women. There's devotion, care, and comfort; but also comparison, competition, jealousy. For longtime friends like Ellie and Mable, there's the added complexity of how friendship evolves (or doesn't) as women age. I was interested in plumbing the depths of the fragile, thorny nature of female friendship—how Ellie and Mable can be both the most caring person the other has in their life, but

also willing and able to slice each other to the bone. They can get into a shouting match over years-long tensions during the day, only to have one save the other from a leering man later that evening. Ellie and Mable love each other, but that love can live alongside resentment.

Mable basks in the luxury of the hotel, but she is also outspoken in her criticism of wealth and the culture of capitalism. Can you discuss this contradiction?

It's important to me to write characters that reflect the true nature of humanity, and I think Mable is just being human. Many people struggle with aligning their values with their basic cravings—like Mable, my friends and I can be well aware of how wealth and privilege has justified and perpetuated the worst societal inequities, and yet we can't help but enjoy aspects of capitalism. I find myself frequently in conversation with my friends, and with myself, about what we can do to move through the world as ethical, thoughtful people, while acknowledging that it's impossible to make perfect choices.

When Ellie and Mable arrive at the hotel, Mable is thrown off by the valet service. This moment sets the tone for much of the trip—they're constantly flustered at the hotel, the five-star restaurants, and the designer stores. In another example, they show up to breakfast in denim shorts only to find themselves surrounded by guests dressed in all white, a secret dress code. Why did you write these scenes?

Wealth operates with unspoken rules—if you have to ask, then you really aren't part of it. Comfort with wealth is also a great gatekeeper of power. Because Ellie and Mable do not belong to the gilded class, I enjoyed writing about how they could at one moment be reveling in the opulence of the hotel, and then in the next be quickly reminded of their outsider status.

The novel follows Ellie and Mable when they are both in their late twenties, on the cusp of youth and adulthood. What interested you about this age?

I think early adulthood can be a precarious time. Traits that might've been tolerable or easy to ignore when you and your friends were younger are starting to calcify, and serious change can feel elusive with each passing year. It can also be a time when realization sets in that life might not be at all what was expected or hoped—you are starting to see the outlines of the decades ahead. Of course, as with any age, change is always possible—I am interested in the few inflection points that can occur during these formative years, and whether and how people will choose to forge a different course in life.

A lot of readers' heart rates will go up when Ellie, who is a lawyer, stops answering work emails and boxes up her work computer and mails it back to her law firm in San Francisco. (She's going from quiet to loud quitting!) Were you holding your breath as you wrote these scenes?

As someone who cut her teeth in offices where standards were high and email responsiveness was required (in one job, I was told within two hours!), I definitely worried for her. But I also cheered Ellie on at the same time—she needed to break bad in many aspects of her life, especially her career. I once heard someone say that those who don't rebel when young do it twice as hard when they're older. I think there is a kernel of truth of this for her.

Speaking of the law, you're a litigator by training. Has the law lent itself to writing fiction?

It definitely has. There's the writing itself: the best legal arguments are propulsive, cast villains and heroes, and pose questions that are satisfactorily answered by the end. In this way, legal writing and fiction are similar. And then there are the parts of legal practice that prepared me for how to be a writer—

litigating gifted me discipline, grit, and endurance, and you need staggering amounts of all three as a writer.

But for all that the law has taught me about writing, it couldn't teach me everything. Tenderness, beauty, and vulnerability—I could only learn about these by writing fiction. I was also mistaken in my belief that legal practice had taught me courage. It had only taught me aggressiveness. True courage is making the most private, intimate parts of yourself public, knowing that people will laugh or hate you for it, and doing it again anyway.

Of all the hotels in the world, why did you choose to set *You Can't Stay Here Forever* at Hotel du Cap-Eden-Roc?

I wanted Ellie and Mable to escape to somewhere that was almost other worldly in its grandeur and opulence. I also knew that real places can do a lot of heavy lifting for you as a writer—readers will already possess an opinion and sense of setting for places with a well-developed reputation.

Hotel du Cap-Eden-Roc satisfied both of these desires. It has a long, storied history of glamour, and is renowned for hosting members of the Lost Generation, heads of state, and many celebrities. Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Taylor had an affair there. Both Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald visited; *Tender is the Night* immortalizes the hotel. Celebrities continue to use it as a playground now, and it's popular during the Cannes Film Festival.

Can you name some books and authors that helped inspire the writing of your debut novel?

There are many authors and books that helped me but if I had to make a short list, I would say Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan Novels and Kazuo Ishiguro's *Remains of the Day* were the most formative. Ferrante is singular in her ability to grasp and accurately portray the complexities of close female friends as they enter different stages of their lives. And I consider *Remains of the Day* one of the finest first-person novels ever written. Whenever I would feel stuck while writing, I would reread passages from the book, hoping that some of Ishiguro's genius might permeate my mind.