John Cho Wrote the Book His Younger Self Needed to Read

Cho's new book, "Troublemaker," speaks to his own experience, both to provide perspective and to foster empathy.

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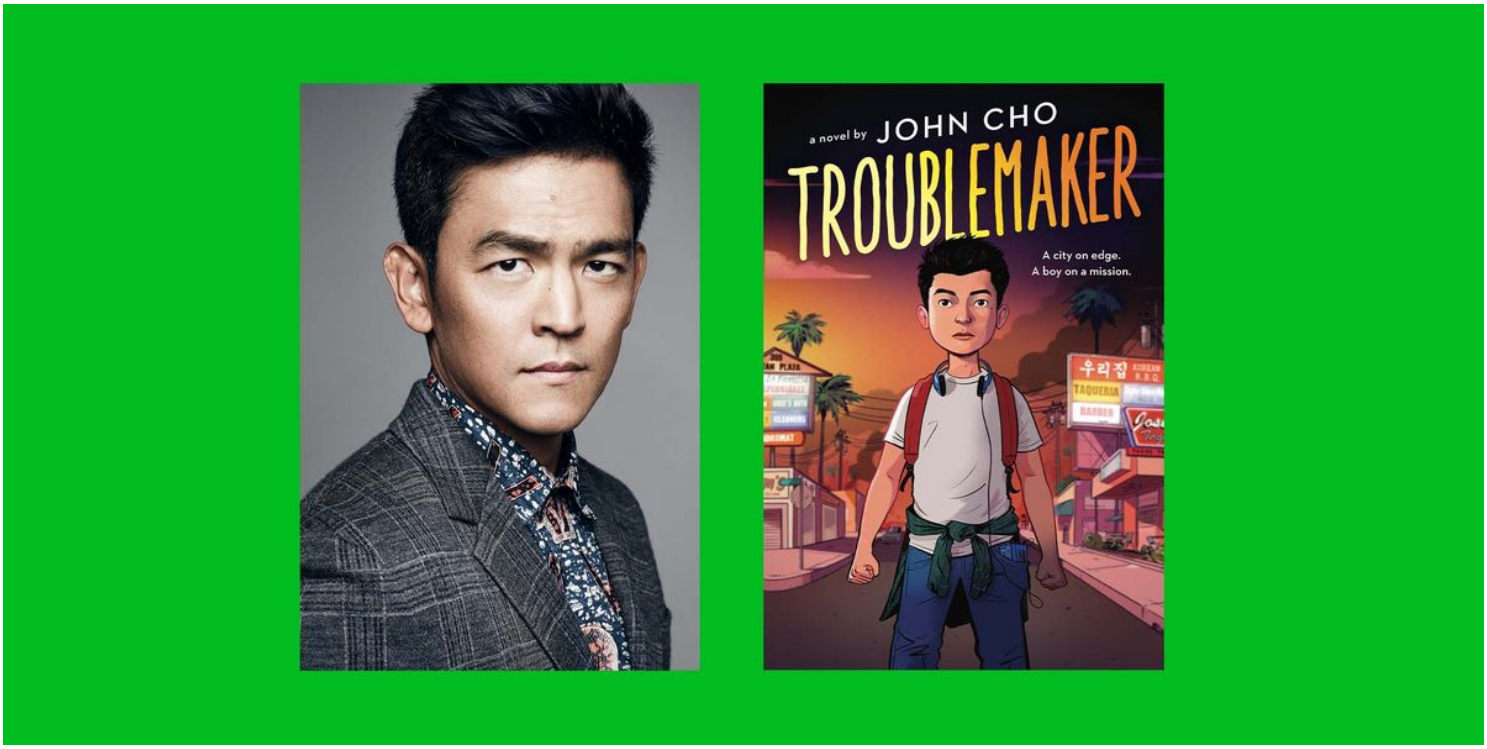

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When John Cho set out to write a children's book, he had his heart set on a mystery novel. But as the line from one of Cho's early films, *Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle*, goes: In the end, the universe tends to unfold as it should.

Cho is most recognizable for his on-screen work in film, with such roles as Sulu in the *Star Trek* reboot and the titular Harold in the *Harold & Kumar* movies, as well as his work on television on shows like *How I Met Your Mother* and *Sleepy Hollow*. But Cho is also a father, and the racism and anger that have metastasized throughout the country the last few years left him wondering how to explain it all to his kids.

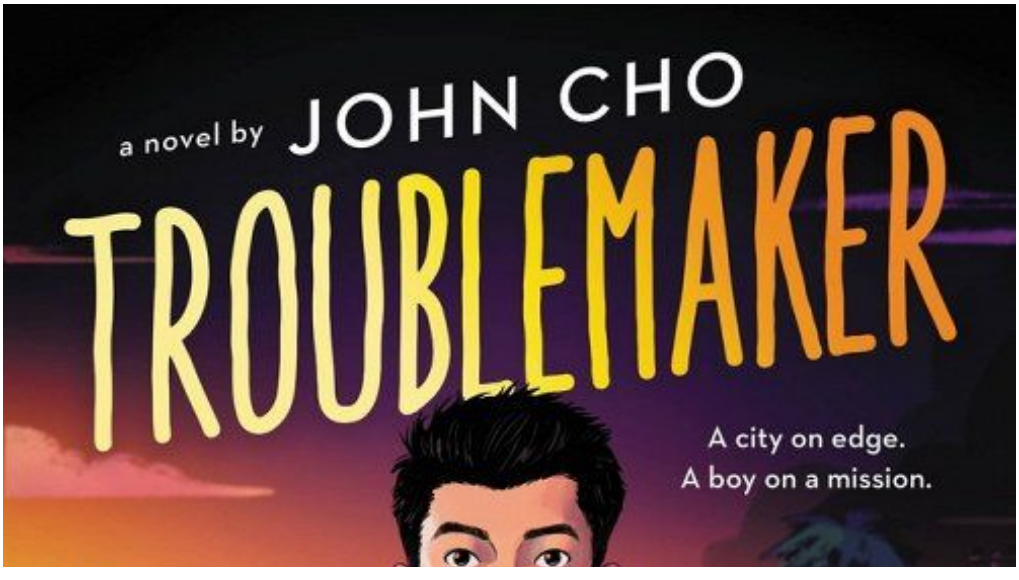
George Floyd's murder, the pandemic, and the rise in anti-Asian violence — watching how such traumas play out on the news with his family, Cho no longer felt a mystery novel was the story he wanted to tell. Instead, he found himself reflecting on his own

identity as a Korean American and whether the bedrock of that identity was as reliable as he'd thought. "It made me reexamine the immigrant journey, what I expected," Cho tells Shondaland. "I thought being more assimilated meant being more accepted." When that no longer felt true, he reached back into his own history and experiences for a narrative that resonated with what he was seeing.

Incidentally, April 29, 2022, marks the 30-year anniversary of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, which were sparked by the acquittal of the four police officers charged with beating Rodney King. "I didn't realize the anniversary was coming up," Cho admits. "I guess I'm not a very good counter." He did realize, however, the parallels between that moment and what we are currently seeing happen in communities across the country. *Troublemaker*, his debut middle-grade novel, is what came from those parallels and memories.

A fast-moving, honest account through the eyes of 12-year-old Jordan, a Korean American boy living in Los Angeles when the King verdict comes down, *Troublemaker* unfolds over the course of a single night's journey through the city. With tensions already running high after the shooting of a Black teen, Latasha Harlins, by a Korean American store owner, Jordan's father, who runs his family's own store, leaves to go check on his business. As pressure continues to build throughout the night, Jordan and his friends decide they must come to his father's aid, while also confronting the racism and prejudices affecting their community.

Troublemaker





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Cho found that Jordan's story took shape largely based on what he'd already read. "A lot was what I'd seen and didn't want to do," he says. "I wanted to be honest to that age. It's a weird time when you're beginning to separate from your parents. It's fraught with mistakes, well-intentioned mistakes." He continues, "The goal is a loving portrayal of a Korean American family." Through a book, he says, you "live with that family for a day." Maybe, he hopes, that glimpse will encourage understanding; maybe it will also force uncomfortable truths about our world.

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One of Cho's greatest challenges came with how to present the gun that's a major (and early-introduced) plot point. "I didn't want to glamorize guns," Cho explains. "I grew up in a generation that had toy guns. I didn't know if it should be part of kids' entertainment, but it's part of kids' worlds." As he states, not only do today's kids encounter them in popular culture, they've experienced lockdowns and shooter drills. They know about guns. "The gun is mostly symbolic for Jordan," he says. "It represents responsibility and manhood. From a Korean American perspective, it represents America."

Some might ask what inspired Cho, who boasts many on-screen successes, to dip his toe into writing. He was an avid young reader — he immediately cites the *Little House on the Prairie* series as one of his favorites — and recalls counting on books for companionship. "That was a period of loneliness for me," he says. "We moved around a lot. Books were my companions." As for many kids, the books of Beverly Cleary and Judy Blume were early discoveries, although he recalls the challenge presented by Blume's *Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing*. "I got one of the biggest beatings of my life because of that book," he remembers, and learned about the consequences of back talk when he repeated a line of dialogue from it. "I got sent to my room and busted out 'be glad to,'" Cho says, referring to a phrase uttered by the book's main character, Peter Hatcher. "My Korean American parents said, 'What?!,' and then all hell broke loose."



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While Ingalls Wilder, Cleary, and Blume are authors whose work still populates many children's libraries, they don't do much to reflect a diverse perspective. "Books are very special, and the relationship with a reader is intense," says Cho, who sought to speak to his own experience, both to provide that perspective and to foster empathy. "Books encourage empathy in a way no other media does," he says.

His own children — a tough crowd for any author — have read the book, Cho says. Their rating? "Good job, Daddy" and a thumbs-up. Cho saw his daughter rereading it recently and took that as another good sign. After all, historical fiction that handles topics like racism and violence is demanding for any audience, let alone middle schoolers, but *Publishers Weekly* calls *Troublemaker* an "accessible yet emotionally complex read."

Overall, writing has been a pleasant shift from acting and one Cho plans to revisit. The end result of putting a book into the world is one he's found "unexpectedly gratifying. Taking a project from beginning to end [is something] actors don't get to do," Cho says, adding that he looks forward to that journey again, maybe even spending more time with Jordan and the other characters in *Troublemaker*. "I'm wondering if there's a way to use these characters again," he says. "I liked them a lot." The voices he's created aren't just something he wants to share with his kids; hopefully, they speak to many other children as well. "There's something incredibly romantic for me about a kid walking into a library and picking up my book," he says. In a way, it's a gift to himself as well, a connection to his own early days as a reader. "I'd like to say I wrote it for my kids, but I really wrote it for a young me."

Madeleine Deliee writes, teaches, and parents in the Washington, D.C. area. She's written for Playboy, CNN, The Washington Post, SyFy Wire, *and many other unrelated outlets. She sometimes tweets about mostly geeky stuff at @MMDeliee.*

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