

Everybody has a story to tell; and in *Little Fires Everywhere*, it's those stories that Celeste Ng addresses – stories that, concealed under mutual hostility and preexistent disregard, may be well ignored, but soon blossom with life from the intentionality of Ng's language and her painstakingly eloquent jargon. Thus Ng's greatest accomplishment within her piece is the literary kaleidoscope she creates, with each of the slightest change in perspective permitting a wholly unique story to be addressed. Eventually through her remarkable character portrayals, Ng emphasizes the values of identity and the constant ventures to discover and maintain such individuality.

*Little Fires Everywhere* is set in Shaker Heights, where everything, as “one of the first planned communities in the nation,” revolves around societal tension established by a firm sense of order, discipline, and regulation. Likewise, its motto stands: “Most communities just happen; the best are planned” (10). Nonetheless, this inevitably leads to a heavy reliance on rules and – albeit subtle – an unanticipated desire for uniformity, which Ng expresses through the indirect juxtaposition of the Richardsons and the Warrens.

The Richardsons epitomize order. Mrs Richardson, furthermore, is the ideal embodiment of the values in Shaker Heights for she had, “her entire existence, lived an orderly and regimented life... had had a plan... [and] followed it scrupulously.” As the rule-abiding citizen, Mrs. Richardson had been “brought up to follow rules, to believe that the proper functioning of the world depended upon her compliance and follow them – and believe – she did” (68); as Mr. Richardson described her, she was “his principled fiancée who always strove for perfection” (73). Mrs Richardson is thus conveyed as a figure bound to the status quo, with a strong belief that following rules can avert risks. By avoiding any form of unanticipated spontaneity and yearning to stay within her comfort zone, Mrs. Richardson is grateful for her predictable yet monotonous lifestyle. Her strive for perfection equivalent to a strive for flawless order aligns with the designs of Shaker Heights and represents herself the orderly society.

Pearl and Mia Warren's settlement at Shake Heights, however, entails a challenge to the Richardsons' former values; although, quite ironically, Mrs. Richardson was who ultimately permitted them to move in, as “she wanted to feel that she was doing good with it” and “it pleased her to make up

the difference” (12). Mia and Pearl had “[moved] around a lot,” with Mia, as she confesses, having “made her daughter live by her whim: moving on anytime she needed new ideas” for her artistic pursuits as a photographer (20) (38). To Mrs. Richardson – whose life had rigidly depended on rules and order – Mia is a “completely different kind of woman leading a completely different life, who seemed to make her own rules with no apologies” (69). Mrs. Richardson’s decisions prove to be a faulty attempt to perform a “good” deed, as the Warrens’ nomadic lifestyle thus far is unacceptable for the Richardsons who have lived a settled, lavish life. Generally, Mia’s eccentricity – specifically that of her passion and drive – is heavily disfavored within the Richardsons, perceived as a fracture in the once orderly society. Hence to the Richardsons, and perhaps to Shaker Heights as a whole, the arrival of the Warrens signals an abnormal, even – in a way – unwanted, twist in the community.

Yet a more direct clash against the Richardsons (and their inclination to ideality) would be Isabelle Richardson, or Izzy – the outlier of the Richardson family, and the true epitome of disorder. To her siblings and parents, Izzy has always been regarded as “the crazy one” (41); as her sister Lexie laments, “At eleven...she had written NOT YOUR PUPPET across her forehead and cheeks just before [a recital], where she stood stock-still” (75). She was also the one responsible for “the toothpick incident” where “three teenagers... [immobilized] an entire high school containing one hundred and twenty-six doors...[by inserting] a toothpick into a lock” initiated by an attempt to avenge a classmate (82). And when the Richardsons’ house “quite burned to the ground,” as foreshadowed at the onset of the novel, they had “known already that Izzy was to blame...[for the] little fires everywhere” (7) (3). Izzy, as per the anecdotes, is rebellious and strong-willed; meanwhile, she is fervid toward committing deeds she believes are necessary. Hence Izzy poses a challenge to the boundaries of normality in Shaker Heights, with Ng’s utilization of her character questioning society’s headlong desire to retreat from risks. Ultimately, the little fires in the Richardsons symbolize Izzy’s constant endeavors to break out of the given status quo, with each flare the sparks of passion and a new beginning.

Nevertheless, the most powerful and distinguishing technique Ng utilizes throughout the entirety of her novel – alongside her captivating language – is her deliberate choice of the third-person omniscient

perspective. Especially with the intricate character establishment in her novel, Ng's all-knowing narration presents the readers with an understanding of both sides of the conflict.

Subsequently, throughout the incident of "Mirabelle McCullough – or, depending which side you were on, May Ling Chow," Mia unknowingly kindles immense conflict and adverse tension among two households – Bebe Chow and the McCulloughs – towards a fight for presumed justice (1) – whether the state should "return custody of May Ling Chow to her biological mother [Bebe Chow]" (137). With Mia evidently supporting Bebe and the Richardsons favoring the McCulloughs, a division arises once more; at the same time, Mrs. Richardson, in addition to her refusal to accept disarray, finds herself with growing resentment towards Mia. While the plot is initially conveyed as to blame Mia for the conflict, Ng alleviates this partial fault by offering a prolonged account of Mia's past stories. Throughout the lines, the readers find out about Mia's deep-rooted ambitions and the struggles she overcame to accomplish her passion; and amid her journeys, one of her most dire struggles had involved Pearl, who, back then, was merely a baby whom "she was carrying...for [the Ryans]" (186). Ng outlines the hardships Mia had gone through, which does more than simply justify her recent decisions – with the Richardsons – that may have appeared rash and inconsiderate.

From the values of motherhood to the intricate coexistence of order and disorder alongside the juxtaposition of intrinsic human nature to human desires, to list all of Ng's intended themes would be impractical, more or less impossible. Yet *Little Fires Everywhere* itself is an intertwining journey of stories – occasionally alongside a divulgence of astonishing and unpredicted backstories – that eventually compiles to form a literary kaleidoscope representing a vast spectrum of identities. And when these identities commingle and coexist, even in a unified society like Shaker Heights, the uniqueness of each individual will glimmer, like the flares of little fires everywhere.