*When the Color Started,* by Bradford Philen rev. by Cara Musashi

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Bradford Philen is an author from Raleigh, North Carolina. Philen has been a teacher in various locations such as: Owamboland, The Bronx, Dakar, and Beijing. He now lives in Manila with his wife and children, teaching high school English. An MFA awardee with the University of Alaska at Anchorage, he’s also written the novel *Autumn Falls* and *Everything is Insha’Allah*, a collection of short stories. *When the Color Started* is Philen’s third, and most recent fiction book.

*When the Color Started* stands as a diverse and intricate collection of stories from lives from all over the globe. No two stories are exactly alike in any regard. With the exception of a few similar settings, each piece has a unique world and set of obstacles. However, you will see common themes throughout many stories such as familial and personal conflicts, along with how these characters go about finding, or not finding the solution.

Containing an abundance of outstanding tactics of writing, one of the most notable would be found in the sheer diversity of voices in the collection. Each story comes from an entirely different voice, each with their own set of challenges and backgrounds. From a Chinese-American student to black single mothers, Philen’s experience of living in various locations shows through his dedication to represent each voice authentically, as in this example from a story being told from the perspective of a girl writing to her English teacher during her SAT exam:

“A clever way to end this informal letter, Mr. Sturdi- vant, might be to jot down a quote from literature that sort of recaps all of the main points, but to be honest, I reckon I’m a little tired of clever and what people want. I want to build a house one day whilst blasting Guns N’ Roses on some loud speakers. How’s that for an ending?”

Clearly, there’s more to this story than the section would suggest, but even in this small excerpt, you can clearly see the amount of personality and distinguishable voice coming from this character. Although each of these characters may be entirely different in terms of races, nationality, and class levels, they all have one thing in common: they’re all fighting their own battles.

In this next excerpt we see a boy struggle to keep his calm while hidden away in the pantry of a friend’s house with a girl during the middle of a hurricane. It’s in this section where we also see the other aspects of the boy’s life beginning to show how much they affect him:

“I slow down. Try to relax and all, but it’s tough because I don’t know how much time I have. The storm outside sounds like it’s on the other side of the pantry door even though Doug lives in Lochmere where all the houses are made of marble and granite and sturdy hardwood and the grass is always trimmed and there’s not a stray leaf or limb anywhere in the yard.”

This is something that Philen threads through most, if not all of the characters in his stories. They each have something that they’re going through, whether it be dealing with family, classmates, or even past, present and future love interests.

Philen’s stories touch boundaries where some would fear to go, occasionally stepping into some of the world’s most prominent social issues, like racism and classism, while maintaining a dignified portrayal of all those he chooses to include. His tone can vary from tense, violent scenes into ones full of love and heartfelt emotions with ease. *When the Color Started* is a journey of a collection that takes you from one end of the globe to another, always leaving you wondering what will come next.