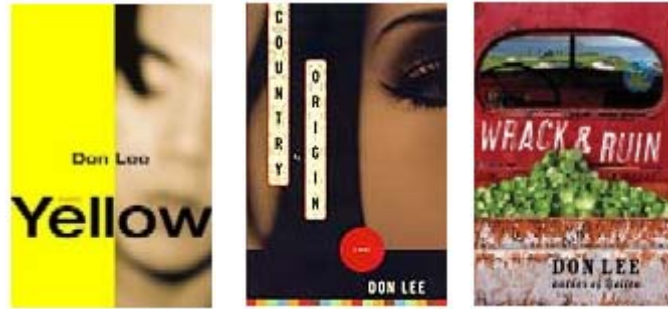


INTERVIEW WITH

DON LEE

Author of *Yellow: Stories* (W. W. Norton 2002);
Country of Origin (W. W. Norton 2004); and
Wrack and Ruin (W. W. Norton 2008)



Kartika Review chats with Don Lee, author of the novel *Country of Origin*, and the short story collection *Yellow*. His new novel, *Wrack and Ruin*, is out now. Don Lee has won the American Book Award, the Edger Award for Best First Novel, the Sue Kaufman Prize, and the Members Choice Award from the Asian American Writers' Workshop. His short fiction has received an O. Henry Award and a Pushcart Prize.



KARTIKA  REVIEW

ISSUE TWO, SPRING 2008

Was the experience of writing this novel different from the experience of writing your first novel, *Country of Origin*?

This one felt a lot easier, although it took about the same amount of time—several months thinking about it, a year writing the first draft, and six months or so revising, two years total. But I felt freer, looser, more confident, this time around. With *Country of Origin*, I'd never attempted a novel before and didn't know if I could do it. With *Wrack and Ruin*, the mystique had been lifted.

Do you find yourself returning to central themes in your writing? Was that the case in setting your novel in Rosarita Bay?

I have a theory, which is that all writers tend to rework the same story, a single story, over and over again. I wouldn't venture to say what mine is, but certainly themes recur in my work. The reason I returned to Rosarita Bay, however, was more of a practical decision. *Country of Origin* was a dark, heavy book, and I wanted to do something lighter, more fun. Also, I'd had to do voluminous amounts of research for the first novel, and I wanted to avoid that. So I figured I could go back to Rosarita Bay. I'd made up that town, I knew that town, I wouldn't have to do much research. The impetus was when I was on tour in San Francisco for *Country of Origin*, and on an off day I drove down to Half Moon Bay, on which Rosarita Bay is based. I hadn't been there in a few years, and it struck me how much the town was changing. This formerly rustic place, with some of the most stringent anti-zoning laws in the country, was being gentrified.

How much of your writing is pre-planned and how much is revealed to you as your story develops?

I start with jotting broad ideas in a sketchbook, then, when I start thinking of scenes or pieces of dialogue, move to index cards, which I shuffle around, and then I begin putting together an outline. But as I'm actually writing, I usually don't know exactly what's going to happen beyond the next few scenes. Things come up unexpectedly and surprise me, which is one of the joys of the process.

Do you think of yourself as an Asian American writer, and even if you don't, do you find yourself labeled as such?

I do think of myself as an Asian American writer, because I'm Asian American and I'm a writer, and oftentimes I write about being Asian American. I'm certainly labeled as such—which doesn't necessarily bother me, although I know that the label probably limits my audience as a writer.

Many Asian Americans criticized *Yellow* for being "not yellow enough," so to speak. What do you make of the irony that non-Asians lauded the book more than Asians did and why do you think that happened?

To tell you the truth, I wasn't aware that *Yellow* has been regarded overall by Asian Americans in a negative manner, and it distresses and upsets me to hear that. What do I make of it, other than wanting to cry and quit writing and crawl in a hole? I don't know how to interpret the criticism, because I'm not familiar with the specifics of it. But maybe this is illustrative: I was doing a reading from *Yellow* once at a college outside of Boston, and the audience was comprised mostly of freshmen. I got some odd questions from the students, the strangest being from an Asian American woman, asking how I justified having such negative characterizations of Asian Americans in my stories. This baffled me at first. After some probing, I figured out the student's main point of contention was that my characters were neurotic, irrational, riddled with all sorts of foibles and flaws—not the greatest (or model) representation of Asian Americans. But of course this was a complete misapprehension of what fiction is or supposed to do. Fiction is not meant to be propaganda. It's not a sociopolitical manifesto. Where would the drama and relevance be in short stories and novels if they were populated solely by people who behave perfectly?

Your book *Yellow* is already a part of the required reading list on many university course syllabi. Truthfully, did you ever anticipate or foresee your stories taken out of the literary arts realm and into the academic and teaching realms?

No, I didn't anticipate it, but I don't think its adoption is quite that extensive. Occasionally I hear from teachers and students using the book in classes, and I'm grateful that it's being studied, for both English/creative writing classes and Asian American Studies courses. However, I was shocked to find out a couple of years ago that there are only about twenty-five Asian American Studies programs in the country. That seems like such a paltry number. I realize, too, that the book's themes are sometimes taken out of context and manipulated to fit the thesis of a particular course. That's okay. I understand the necessity of academic appropriation.

This is more of a structural question. *Country of Origin* is such a meticulously plotted story, both in its use of multiple narratives and its detective/mystery aspects. What made you decide to leap forward many years at the conclusion of the novel?

That's an old Alice Munro trick I've always liked. She'll sometimes leap forward thirty years in the last paragraph of a short story. For *Country of Origin*, there was a practical reason for setting it in 1980. I last lived in Tokyo in 1978, and I wanted to keep the time period close to my personal experience. I slid it forward a little to 1980 because it happened to be a watershed year in politics. But in the end I wanted to link the novel with the present time, and I wanted to know what happened to these characters over the course of their lives.

That's interesting, the thought of wanting to know what happens to your characters over the course of their lives. Do your characters linger with you even after you've finished writing a novel or does the process of writing a new novel require you to let them go?

In general, I do let go of them, but I have a pretentious postmodern habit of referring to characters or places from

earlier work in new novels or stories. It's just a way of entertaining myself, seeing if I can fit these things in--sometimes transferring whole paragraphs, verbatim--and seeing if anyone will notice. Hardly anyone does.

In regards to your audience, do you keep your readers in mind when you're writing?

Norton was excited by the idea of a "literary thriller" for my first novel, but I really haven't felt any pressure from them to deliver a particular type of book. They see what it is, then decide how they might be able to sell it. I think my first obligation is to myself--trying to write something that pleases me, that I'm proud of, that shows that I'm growing as a writer.

Can you run me through a typical day? Do you write everyday with a set goal or do you fit writing in where you can?

When I was working at Ploughshares, I generally wrote on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday, all day. For *Country of Origin*, I was very regimented and would force myself to write two pages a day, so that I'd have a first draft within one year. For *Wrack and Ruin*, I was less disciplined. Sometimes I'd write a paragraph, others days four pages, but the first draft ended up taking the same amount of time, a year. Now that I'm teaching full-time, my writing has to be confined to the holiday break and summer. I used to write by longhand on yellow legal pads, but halfway through *Wrack and Ruin*, I switched to composing on a laptop (while listening to my iPod), and I've learned to write anywhere, anytime, during whatever snippets of time I can find. Moving away from this frame of mind where I have to reserve a huge block of uninterrupted time and have a specific place to write has made me much more productive.

In your creative writing workshops, does the percentage of Asian students in the class proportionately reflect the percentage of Asian students at the university? If not, how does it diverge and what's your rationale for that?

At Macalester, 7.7% of the students are Asian American, and 72% are white. Last semester, out of 31 students in my two classes, I think I had 4 Asian Americans. This semester, out of 19 students, I have none. But that averages out to 8%, so that's right on target for the proportion of Asian Americans at the school. It's a very small school—1,900 students total.

Among Asian students aspiring to become fiction writers, how much of their racial identity to these students tend to incorporate in their manuscripts, if at all?

The few Asian American students I've had hardly ever wrote about identity. Their characters usually weren't race-specific. I don't know if this was because they were hesitant to broach the subject, or they didn't think of identity as an urgent subject for fiction. My sense is that it's the latter, and I believe that reflects a movement among Asian American writers in general. Yet, at the same time, there hasn't been a decrease in the number of Asian American writers' and artists' groups, a community I find very encouraging and enlivening. I've always been a big admirer of the Asian American Writers Workshop in New York, and here in the Twin Cities, I've had the pleasure of getting to know writers like David Mura, Sun Yung Shin, Ed Bok Lee, and several others. There's solace and comfort in being with brothers and sisters.

Changrae Lee's book *Aloft* garnered quite a bit of criticism from the Asian American community for portraying non-Asian main characters. This seems like the most absurd critique, and yet it's often given out to any writer who attempts to write about characters who are not of the same racial heritage as the writer him or herself. What are your thoughts on this?

I thought having that novel narrated by a sixty-year-old white guy was brave, brave, brave, and I credit Chang-rae with starting a mini-revolution. I think he knew he'd be hit with a lot of flak for doing that, but he did all Asian American writers a huge service. Because of that book, all of us feel freer to slip away from writing about identity and ethnicity, moving on to whatever captures our fancy.

And finally, in your experience as an editor at *Ploughshares*, and as an author, what are the chances for a literary fiction writer these days? Does it seem any better or worse than it used to be?

No, sadly I think the chances for literary fiction writers are worse. There's been a palpable downturn in the book business. Young writers have always gotten the biggest advances and most attention with their first books, because they have no previous sales history, and that still holds true, but I don't think it happens as frequently as it used to. The authors who have more trouble these days are midlist writers trying to sell subsequent books. So I feel fortunate to still be publishing.

