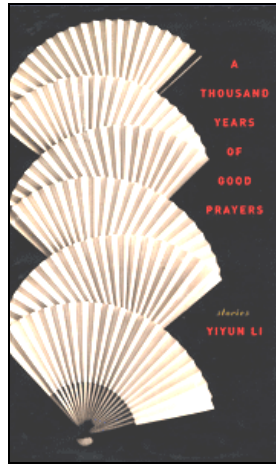


## AUTHOR INTERVIEW



### *Conversation with* **Yiyun Li**

Yiyun Li's debut story short story collection, *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers*, catapulted her from a quiet, emerging writer from the University of Iowa's MFA program into a quiet, award-winning writer. These days she is also a professor—having taught at Mills College and now at UC Davis.

She and her story collection, which debuted in 2006, won numerous awards—the inaugural Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award, the PEN/Hemingway Award, Guardian First Book Award, and the California Book Award for first fiction. Additionally, she was short listed for the Orange Award for new writers and for the Kiriyama Prize.

Despite her busy schedule, Yiyun Li quickly agreed to an interview with *Kartika Review* and in a show of great

**KARTIKA  REVIEW**

ISSUE THREE, SUMMER 2008

generosity, shared her thoughts on writing. Having known Yiyun previously, it was a challenge to come up with questions that I had not yet asked her, and would still be illuminating to a wider audience.

In an exchange of emails, she gathered up gracious answers—to our questions on the craft of writing, her writing process, and her upcoming novel titled *The Vagrants*.



*ZILKA: What determined you to become a writer?*

LI: That is an interesting question. I am always a very nosy person and a huge fan of gossiping, and that may contribute to my becoming a storyteller. I like to eavesdrop too, and I think by nature I am very shy so to satisfy my curiosity it seems easier to make up a story than to find out the real story by talking to people, which is a different skill.

*ZILKA: Do you draw your characters from life? How do you start a story?*

LI: I think I draw more of the situations from life than from characters. People are fascinating and mysterious and in real life they don't give a writer answers or explanations, but their situations are always there. I start a story by looking a situation that fascinates me, and oftentimes they come from newspapers. For instance, I read in the news about a few retired women establishing a private investigation firm to battle extramarital affairs in China, which is to me a fascinating situation, so I made up a story about six old women and their quests in maintaining traditional society. Of course like every story I write they ended up not getting what they wanted. I think most of my stories (and my upcoming novel) take some situations from real life, but the characters--I have to make them up.

*ZILKA: Will you ever write in first person?*

LI: Apparently this question comes from someone who knows that I don't write in first person--well in fact I do think I

wrote one story in first person, and a couple stories with first person plural--that communal voice I've always been fond of. I don't feel I am a natural first-person narrator, though I would like to try. I was reading John Banville's *The Book of Evidence*, a very good and disturbing book in first person, and I was so inspired that I began to compose in my head in first person. Maybe I will try it in my next novel.

*ZILKA: Would you consider yourself a "language writer" and what are your thoughts on that term, "language writer"?*

LI: I was a language writer in Chinese. I was a horrible writer in my mother tongue but I could spend all my energy making my language saturated with beautiful images and metaphors. No, I don't think for my career I am a language writer, or want to be one. I do hope to improve my language, but for me characters and stories are the most important elements for fiction, and they are my priorities.

*ZILKA: When you write, what audience do you have in mind? Is it Chinese? Chinese American? Asian American? Is it America?*

LI: I don't have audience in my mind when I write. I think about readers' reactions--but I think I did not come up with this--I probably stole this from a William Trevor interview, where he said something similar (in a more beautiful way). So I don't think about Chinese or Chinese American or Asian American or American. I think about how a reader possibly reacts to my story, say, compared to a Trevor story, or an Isaac Babel story, or a J. M. Coetzee book.

*ZILKA: What was it like to transition from writing short stories to a novel? And screen writing--regarding the stories you adapted to the big screen?*

LI: I wrote a novel (a horrible one, which I was able to salvage and make into a story) before I ever wrote a story, so I think I experienced the transition from writing a novel to writing stories and then back to novel. I don't think it was a hard transition except a novel requires so much more time and consistency and memory--I realized in the middle of

**KARTIKA  REVIEW**

ISSUE THREE, SUMMER 2008

writing my novel some of my minor characters changed names and jobs.

I think with a novel the hardest part is revision. It is much easier to revise a story--to me a rough draft of a story oftentimes has all the things (or more than all the things) it needs and the revision has to do with putting them into the right place, while revising a novel sometimes is just to start from the very beginning again, and again.

Screen writing--I only wrote one screenplay--but it taught me hugely about storytelling. I was very self-conscious when I wrote the first draft of the script for *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers*, and it was a mess. Then I looked at it again and realized that there was little difference between writing a script and writing a story. They are both about telling a good story in a very limited space.

*ZILKA: Do you think that someday, as you spend more of your life in the U.S., you'll write about the Asian American experience? Do you prefer to write stories set in China or the United States? Will you continue to write stories set in China?*

LI: I don't know. I really don't know how to answer these questions. At this moment I am writing stories set in China, but I can't speak for the future.

*ZILKA: How do you navigate the foreign with a readership that probably, largely is not familiar with China?*

LI: Perhaps I don't think about this problem as often as I should have. I don't think about it much. If I look at the books I love--for instance, J. M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, or Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of A Yellow Sun*, or any of William Trevor's novels set in Ireland--they are oftentimes about places of which I knew little of. Still I love them for what the authors have done to me as a reader. I think if I could achieve what these authors have achieved, it does not matter that if my readers are not familiar with China.

*ZILKA: Is working in English becoming more natural to you? Would you ever write a story in Chinese?*

LI: Yes writing in English is much more natural to me (even though I still struggle with the language). I don't think I would ever write a story in Chinese. I don't think that idea appeals to me.

*ZILKA: You haven't had your work translated in China--why?*

LI: I don't think I like that idea so I said no to a possible publisher. There are plenty of great books that should be translated and introduced to Chinese audience (for instance, Colm Toibin and William Trevor will be published in China this year), and I don't think I should take a spot before many of the great writers are translated. Also, direct translation would not work in my case--had I written the stories in Chinese I would have used more of the cultural and historical references that now I can't use for my readers.

*ZILKA: Some people call you "anti-Chinese?" What is your reaction to that?*

LI: When I first encountered these sentiments I was not happy. But now I don't think they bother me anymore. When you don't make your own people into heroes people think you are airing dirty laundry. It happens to African American writers, to Indian writers, Bangladesh writers, or any writers that are not white male Americans, I imagine. But I am not interested in making characters into heroes. That is not why I write.

*ZILKA: Are you ever surprised when you travel around by what readers make of your writings, by how they connect with your writing?*

LI: I don't think I am surprised by how readers react. For every writer there are a few of his best readers--his dream readers, who understand every word he writes, and then there are readers who could misread and misinterpret--benignly or not so benignly, but those are extremes. Most readers fall into the middle somewhere, as the different shades of gray between the black and white. I think as a fiction writer one should be able to imagine these things.

**KARTIKA  REVIEW**

ISSUE THREE, SUMMER 2008

*ZILKA: What recent books have excited you?*

LI: Molly Keane's *Good Behavior*, which I really enjoyed, and after finishing it I sent it immediately to a friend. The book was published in 1981 so it could hardly be called a recent book; Molly Keane is my recent discovery, though. And John Banville's *The Book of Evidence* and John McGahern's *Amongst the Women*. None of the books were recently published, though.

*ZILKA: Do you have any particular words of encouragement for emerging Asian American writers?*

LI: Ambition and patience are both very important for an emerging writer.

*ZILKA: Can you give us a hint on what you're working on next?*

LI: I just finished a novel, *The Vagrants*, which is coming out in February 2009, so now I am returning to stories (I do really love writing stories). And possibly starting a new novel some time.

