

## TERRY HONG

My major literary confession for the year: I haven't yet read Khalid Hosseini's *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. There, I've committed it to print.

Now my memorable Khalid Hosseini story: I read *Kite Runner* before most mortals because the powers that be decided I'd be blessed with an early galley. HOLY MOLY! It instantly made my top five ever. So when Hosseini arrived in D.C.—his second stop on his inaugural book tour—I grabbed one of my closest friends and headed to the bookstore. Amazingly enough, besides a handful of relatives, friend Sogand and I were the only two there. Hosseini complimented Sogand on her Farsi characters. That was our brush with fame! Of course, he's now virtually untouchable. So legendary is he that I'm afraid that the shrine-in-my-mind to him might combust should *Suns* prove disappointing. I don't read reviews (I only write them), but Sogand has told me *Suns* is indeed splendid. And yet, as the year ends, it remains unread ... I can, however, still tell you about some of the books I *did* read this year. So many books, so little time.

### FICTION

#### **The Uncommon Reader: A Novella**

ALAN BENNETT, *Farrar, Straus & Giroux*

With a young kitchen worker as her initial guide, the Queen becomes so absorbed in reading that elaborate plots are hatched by her staff in hopes of returning her attention to her duties. But by the time her accomplice is sent elsewhere, the Queen has well feasted on the fruit of knowledge and her resulting discontent will take her far beyond her royally circumscribed life. Avid readers will especially delight in Bennett's erudite playfulness in this sparkling reminder of why we read—and why some write.

#### **The Reluctant Fundamentalist: A Novel**

MOHSIN HAMID, *Harcourt*

A deserved Booker 2007 shortlister, Hamid's slim, powerful title is a deconstruction of the failure of the American Dream for those who look like the enemy. Changez is a young, accomplished Pakistani transplant with a Princeton pedigree, a top Midtown Manhattan money job, and even a growing circle of friends in all the right places. But after the Towers fall, he is under sus-

picion. Changez looks on as his American Dream pixilates and crumples and once seemingly wide-eyed wonder turns into outrage and betrayal.

#### **The Queens of K-town: A Novel**

ANGELA MI YOUNG HUR, *MacAdam/Cage*

As elliptical as Hur's debut novel is, it's also incredibly dense, weighed down by the trials and tribulations of a lost generation of Korean American Manhattanites whose teenage lives revolve around the clubs and restaurants of the city's Korea-town. Cora Moon returns to Manhattan to commit suicide, alternately making plans for death as she recalls her precarious life a decade earlier.

#### **Bloodletting & Miraculous Cures**

VINCENT LAM, *Weinstein Books*

*Bloodletting's* loosely connected, layered stories follow four young doctors-in-training into their various medical careers—two successful, one not, and one prematurely stunted. With four distinct narrative threads that mingle, diverge, and ultimately converge, *Bloodletting* is a swift, dynamic read. What makes Lam's debut remarkable is his ability to deftly underscore and expose larger human issues with nonpedantic subtlety. With the power to entertain *and* educate with fluidity and style ... now that just might be a miraculous literary cure after all.

#### **Free Food for Millionaires**

MIN JIN LEE, *Warner*

As the daughter of struggling Korean immigrants, Casey Han has created a persona defined by her expensive tastes, her magna cum laude Princeton degree, and a wealthy family friend who is always there to lend a helping hand. Unsure of who she is underneath this veneer, she hops among various apartments and beds in search of both independence and stability. Lee's almost 600-page debut novel moves quickly, filled with characters who are all damaged, each searching for that elusive thing called happiness.

## God of Luck

RUTHANNE LUM McCUNN, *Soho*

McCunn has built her literary career by breathing life into certain moments of forgotten history. Her latest title explores the little-known tragic experience during the 19th century when Chinese men were brutally kidnapped and forced into slave labor in the guano mines of faraway Peru. A companion piece of sorts to her prior novel *The Moon Pearl*, *God of Luck* continues the intertwined narratives of a pair of twins; while *Moon* details the sister's spinster life, *Luck* recounts the kidnapped brother's hopeful love story.

## The Assassin's Song: A Novel

M.G. VASSANJI, *Knopf*

Wrapped up in an epic 700-year-old mystical mystery, Vassanji's remarkable sixth novel is an exercise in perspective. The ever-elusive definitions of right and wrong, truth and deception, the chosen and the outcast—especially in matters of religion—are all dependent on who's asking and who's answering. Heir apparent as the designated lord of a holy shrine in India, Karsan Dargawalla wants nothing more than to be ordinary. In his lifelong attempt to eschew his destiny, he escapes to the U.S. and then to Canada, living a life in which truth and illusion blur. Tragedy eventually sends him back to his past—if only to ensure his (and his people's) future.

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### NONFICTION

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## Brother, I'm Dying

EDWIDGE DANTICAT, *Knopf*

In July 2004, just as she accepts that her father will succumb to pulmonary fibrosis, Danticat learns that she is carrying her first child. During the following months of incubating this precious new life, Danticat will endure the loss of two fathers—both her birth father and his brother, Joseph, who raised her and her younger brother and who dies in the custody of negligent customs officials in Miami. Through the seemingly effortless grace of Danticat's words, a family's tragedy is transformed into a promise of collective hope.

**Planet India: How the Fastest-Growing Democracy Is Transforming America and the World**, MIRA KAMDAR, *Scribner*

Looking into the brave new world, more likely than not, the next generations of America's best and brightest will be working for Indian and Chinese multinational companies. Read why ... and be prepared. Bonus: Fascinating and inspiring stories will keep you hooked.

## Driven Out: The Forgotten War Against Chinese Americans

JEAN PFAELZER, *Random House*

In the latter 19th-century, thousands of Chinese Americans were viciously purged from their homes throughout the West Coast. What makes *Driven Out* more than another tome of historical woe are the little-known tales of valiant and tenacious Chinese American resistance. Rather than succumb to these acts of violent injustice, Pfaelzer gives countless examples of how the Chinese fought back, including some 7,000 lawsuits that were filed by Chinese immigrants in the decade that followed the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the first U.S. law that discriminated on the basis of race.

## The Omnivore's Dilemma

*A Natural History of Four Meals*

MICHAEL POLLAN, *Penguin*

The perfect companion piece to *Fast Food Nation*, with even gorier details of death and destruction, as well as the most enlightening look at where, when, and how our food gets processed in our overindustrialized food chain. Not to be missed, although after reading it, you'll never want to eat again.

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### GRAPHIC NOVELS

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## Kampung Boy

*Town Boy*, LAT, *First Second*

A delightful, joyful pair of titles about a young Muslim boy, Mat, growing up in a rural village (*kampung*) in 1960s Malaysia and his everyday joy of discovery and plain fun. *Town Boy* continues with urban adventures when Mat's family moves to the quickly industrializing town of Ipoh to follow Mat, who has already been at boarding school there for almost a year.

**TEKKONKINKREET: *Black & White***

TAIYO MATSUMOTO, Translated From the Japanese by LILLIAN OLSEN, *VIZ Media*

Two young urchins, Black and White, run the streets of Treasure Town, a decaying urban playground of violence and destruction. Because they have superhuman powers, even the local police and the *yakuza* (Japan's criminal underworld) can't control them—the boys are the town's de facto protectors. When a new evil presence enters their turf, the boys must fight off unspeakable, inhumane powers, which they manage to do until they're separated when White is brutally injured. On his own, Black struggles to maintain not only his shaky control of the town but that of his own unhinging psyche as well. At its core, *TEKKONKINKREET* is a haunting story about two little kids struggling to make it on their own in a world gone completely awry with only a newly sprouted apple tree to offer future hope.

**The Kurosagi Corpse Delivery Service**

Story by EIJI OTSUKA, Art by HOUSUI YAMAZAKI, Translated From the Japanese by TOSHIFUMI YOSHIDA, Edited & English Adaptation by CARL GUSTAV HORN, *Dark Horse Comics*

Four fabulous volumes (the fourth just out) about a mismatched clan that makes up the fantastically talented Kurosagi ("black crane") Corpse Delivery Service. Five unemployed Buddhist university students band together to help corpses find eternal peace, so to speak. Numata finds the dead, Karatsu talks to the dead, Sasaki hacks any necessary background information about the dead, Makino preserves the dead, and Yata channels an alien voice that speaks through a hand-held sock puppet that is often the lone voice of reason. Irreverent dark humor—with plenty of gore, so don't read it late at night—fills these addictive volumes as the fivesome help suffering souls find everlasting closure. Bonus: If you're familiar with Dark Horse's other eerie series, *Mail* (see "Windows: Asian Literature in Translation," Sept/Oct 2007 *TBR*), Vol. 4 will be especially bone-chilling fun.

**MW**, OSAMU TEZUKA, Translated From the Japanese by CAMELLIA NIEH, *Vertical*

Who knew the "godfather of manga" could be this dark? When a mysterious poison gas kills the inhabitants of a Japanese island that was once home to a foreign military base, two survivors are inextricably linked by tragedy that is

sealed by an illicit relationship that cannot be severed. The older, Garai, turns to God and takes his priestly vows. The younger, Yuki, a brilliant, charismatic, rising banker, is mired in a secret life of torturous murder. Depraved Yuki flaunts his evildoing as he "confesses" to the tortured Garai, who can do nothing to stop him. When Yuki devises the ultimate destruction of the human race, Garai can no longer keep his bond of silence.

**Shortcomings, ADRIAN TOMINE**

*Drawn & Quarterly/Farrar, Straus & Giroux*

The poignant shortcomings of soulful slacker Ben Tanaka are artfully presented in this striking volume. And, of course, Ben isn't the only one with shortcomings. When his live-in relationship in Oakland falls apart and his girlfriend leaves him to take a Manhattan internship, Ben finds himself succumbing to his wandering eye, spending ever more time with his lesbian best friend and eventually flying to New York to see what the hubbub is about.

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**CHILDREN'S BOOKS**

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**The Year of the Rat**

*Tales From the Chinese Zodiac*, OLIVER CHIN Illustrated by MIAH ALCORN, *Immedium*

Bing's new pet, baby rat Ralph, proves to be a handful as he must learn to mind his own business and rein in his curiosity, not to mention his uncontrollable gnawing. Of course, his smarts and resourcefulness eventually save the day. The third in Chin's animal zodiac series provides a waggish romp exploring the characteristics of those born in the upcoming Year of the Rat (like my daughter).

**Surfer of the Century: *The Life of Duke***

*Kahanamoku*, ELLIE CROW, Illustrated by RICHARD WALDREP, *Lee & Low*

An inspiring, poignant biography of the legendary surfer Duke Kahanamoku, who was also the fastest swimmer in the world for 16 years! In spite of his championships, Kahanamoku still faced endless prejudice because of his darker Hawaiian American skin, yet he managed to graciously triumph over countless obstacles.

### **Kindness Is Cooler, Mrs. Ruler**

MARGERY CUYLER, Illustrated by  
SACHIKO YOSHIKAWA, *Simon & Schuster*

Mrs. Ruler finds fun and inventive ways to encourage her kindergarten students to eventually perform 100 random acts of kindness. Is there a better lesson?

### **Armando and the Blue Tarp School**

EDITH HOPE FINE &  
JUDITH PINKERTON JOSEPHSON,  
Illustrated by HERNÁN SOSA, *Lee & Low*

Because he must help his father, Armando does not have time to attend Señor David's school, made of a single blue tarp spread on the ground. When his parents realize that education is Armando's only way out of their impoverished circumstances, they give him the afternoons to learn about the world beyond their garbage dump. This story is based on the experiences of a real-life teacher who spent decades teaching some of Mexico's poorest children.

### **The Red Thread: An Adoption Fairy Tale**

GRACE LIN, *Albert Whitman & Co*

A delightful new spin on how adoptive parents and children are bound together. Using the age-old Chinese belief that a red thread binds people together in love, Lin has created a touching fable about a king and queen who, in spite of their near-perfect life, find themselves in great pain. A wise old peddler offers special glasses that reveal a red thread attached to their hearts. The couple must journey to the thread's end to find their heart's desire, a precious daughter to call their own.

### **Samsara Dog, HELEN MANOS**

Illustrated by JULIE VIVAS, *Kane/Miller*

Get ready to weep. Dog's many lives are beautifully recounted in this gorgeous title about life cycles and reincarnation. Born again and again into jarringly different new circumstances, Dog finally finds eternal peace when he experiences the joys—and heartbreaks—of unconditional love. If you buy one book this year for your kids, let it be this one.

### **The Best Eid Ever**

ASMA MOBIN-UDDIN, Illustrated by  
LAURA JACOBSEN, *Boyd's Mills*

When Aneesa, a young Muslim girl, wakes up on the first morning of Eid with just her grandmother, she greatly misses her parents, who are on a pilgrimage to Mecca. At the prayer hall, Aneesa meets two girls whose family escaped war in their homeland with virtually nothing. Aneesa learns the true meaning of Eid as she shares some of her bountiful gifts, indeed making it the best Eid of all.

### **Motherbridge of Love**

MOTHER BRIDGE OF LOVE, Illustrated by  
JOSÉE MASSE, *Barefoot Books*

A lovingly illustrated poem submitted anonymously by an adoptive mother to the Mother Bridge of Love, a charity founded by acclaimed writer Xinran that reaches out to Chinese adopted children around the world. The book celebrates the adopted child who is deeply rooted in love, who bridges two mothers, two cultures, two lives.

### **The Arrival, SHAUN TAN**

*Arthur A. Levine Books/Scholastic*

A spectacular book-without-words that traces one family's immigration story with brilliant imagination. In an unnamed troubled land, a man leaves his wife and young daughter behind in search of freedom in a new country. His adjustments are initially overwhelming and disorienting, but with the help of new friends, he slowly finds his way and is eventually reunited with his family. ■