

IN CELEBRATION OF ASIAN PACIFIC
AMERICAN HERITAGE MONTH

A SURVEY OF NEW & NOTABLE BOOKS
by Terry Hong

If it's May, it must be Asian Pacific American Heritage Month, which means I'm back with so many new and notable books that I'm cross-eyed! As with all roundups, I never manage to get through nearly enough titles: My hands are grabbier than my brain. I do have delusions that someday, I'll actually catch up with all my reading piles.

So here's my latest sampling of books highlighting the Asian and Asian Pacific American experience and books by authors of Asian and Asian Pacific American heritage. Call me an escapist, but you can see I'm partial to fiction. And call me a futurist, but the proliferation of voices originating from China and India are surely a sign of things to come.

ADULT FICTION

A Golden Age: A Novel, Tahmima Anam
HarperCollins, \$24.95 cloth,
ISBN 978-0-06-147874-1

Here's the best news up-front: Anam's impressive debut is the first of a planned trilogy. While still mourning the sudden loss of her too-young husband, Rehana loses custody of her young son and daughter to a scheming brother-in-law. Separated for a year with her children faraway in Lahore while she remains in Dhaka, Rehana manages to get them back out of sheer will, determined that she will never lose them again. In 1971, when the people of Bangladesh declare independence from Pakistan, Rehana is no longer certain she can protect her children during a horrific time marked by betrayal and terror. But she won't remain a silent by-stander while civil war threatens to destroy her family, friends, and adopted country.

Mountains Painted With Turmeric

Lil Bahadur Chettri
Translated From the Nepali by Michael J. Hutt
Columbia University, \$22.50 cloth,
ISBN 978-0-231-14356-1

Ironically named "Wealthy One," Dhané is a poor farmer who can't get a lucky break in the small village his family has called home for many generations. Originally published in the 1950s, this new edition offers a rare, resonating glimpse of remote Nepalese life—including an unflinching look at the corruption of those in power against those without.

The Gift of Rain, Tan Twan Eng
Weinstein/Hachette, \$23.95 cloth,
ISBN 978-1-60286-024-7

If you read one book this year, let it be this epic stunner! One rainy evening, an elderly gentleman finds himself opening the door to his past in the form of an elderly woman who arrives bearing a gift. Although strangers, the two share a complicated past, which magnificently unfolds in this astonishing debut novel. Half-British, half-Chinese Philip Hutton is the youngest (and only mixed-race) child of a powerful British trading family based in Malaysia. On the eve of World War II, the gorgeous islands show no hint of the devastation about to unfold, and young Hutton finds himself befriending an elegant Japanese man, Hayato Endo, who has taken residence on the tiny island across from the Hutton estate, the island also a Hutton property. Endo begins to train Hutton in *aikido*, transforming the distant teen into a strong, confident young man. But nothing is as it appears, and as war and the much-feared Japanese finally arrive on Malaysian shores, survival will mean betrayal and redemption, and ultimately love.

A Case of Exploding Mangoes: A Novel

Mohammed Hanif
Knopf, \$24.00 cloth, ISBN 978-0-307-26807-5

Pakistani dictator General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq's sudden death in a mysterious 1988 plane crash remains unsolved. Hanif, once part of the Pakistani air force and now a British expat, cleverly presents a riotous fictional version of how it all might have happened. Air Force Junior Officer Ali Shigri is still grieving the suicide of his hero father, who was one of Zia's top commanders. Arrested for possibly helping his roommate go AWOL, Shigri proves to be a wily, unreliable narrator, but his charm is addictive as he unfolds a plot that is tragic and wicked, entertaining and shocking.

Happy Family: A Novel, Wendy Lee

Black Cat/Grove, \$14.00 paper,
ISBN 978-0-8021-7046-0

This slim volume resonates long after the last page, especially for mothers in today's overscheduled, harried world. Hua Wu, a recent Chinese immigrant working a dead-end waitress job in Chinatown, meets stylish Jane Templeton and her adopted Chinese daughter, Lily. A bond quickly forms and Hua eventually quits her job to become Lily's nanny. As Hua becomes more attached to the girl, lines blur and who is whose daughter becomes indistinguishable.

Watching it all unfold through a mother's eyes proves painfully disturbing.

This Is a Bust, Ed Lin
Kaya Press/D.A.P., \$14.95 paper,
ISBN 978-1-885-03045-0

While Robert Chow's life might be a bust, this second novel for the talented Lin turns out to be quite the page-turner. As the token Chinese policeman in 1976 Chinatown, Chow is also an all-American Vietnam vet, barely dealing with the inhumane aftermath of war by drowning himself in booze. While his higher-ups think he's fit only for ribbon-cutting ceremonies and other photo ops, Chow manages to solve a Chinatown murder solo—it helps to speak the language!—and picks up a few true friends along the way.

The Sound of Language: A Novel

Amulya Malladi
Ballantine, \$16.95 paper,
ISBN 978-0-345-48316-4

Indian-born, U.S.-, UK-, and now Denmark-domiciled Malladi is a literary chameleon, thanks to her changing addresses. *Language*, which features a young Afghani refugee woman escaping unnamable horrors under the Taliban, is almost like reading a sister text of Hosseini's *Splendid Suns*, as if Raihana could have been a relative or friend of Hosseini's Laila (there's even a Layla in *Language*)—one who managed to get out. In *Language*, Raihana adapts quickly to her new Danish life, living with a distant cousin and his family. As she learns the new language that sounds like the "buzzing of a thousand bees," she ironically finds work with a widowed Danish beekeeper still mourning the recent death of his beloved wife. A tentative friendship develops between the two lost souls, causing friction between the very different communities to which each belongs.

The Pakistani Bride, Bapsi Sidhwa

Introduction by Anita Desai
Milkweed Editions, \$14.00 paper,
ISBN 978-1-571-31063-7

First published in 1983, Sidhwa's haunting first novel has been brought back with a new introduction by grand dame Anita Desai. It is based on a true story Sidhwa heard while traveling in Pakistan about a young bride who ran away from a brutal marriage, only to be hunted like an animal and murdered in the name of honor. Sidhwa gives voice to that silent soul, giving her a history, a life, and even hope.

Animal's People, Indra Sinha
Simon & Schuster, \$25.00 cloth,
ISBN 978-1-4165-7878-9

A 2007 Booker Prize nominee, Sinha's third title is presented as a series of 23 directly transcribed tapes, spoken by a creature called "Animal," who was once human before an industrial chemical catastrophe (inspired by the 1984 Bhopal poisonous gas leak) twisted his limbs and bones into unrecognizable form. Living in the slums amidst survivors and supporters trying to fight the giants that caused the tragic disaster, 19-year-old Animal narrates his tenuous existence, at once desperate and foul, infused with moments of joy and unexpected beauty.

The Age of Shiva: A Novel

Manil Suri
Norton, \$24.95 cloth, ISBN 978-0-393-06569-5

The long-awaited follow-up to Suri's glowing debut, *The Death of Vishnu*, features headstrong Meera, who escapes her controlling father's house at age 17 by marrying handsome crooner Dev, which, alas, proves to be a suffocating mistake. The birth of their one son brings utter joy and meaning to Meera's life, but needy infants soon become impatient children and eventually independent adults, and devoted Meera must somehow learn to let her baby grow ... and go.

The Ginseng Hunter: A Novel

Jeff Talarigo
Talese/Doubleday, \$21.95 cloth,
ISBN 978-0-385-51739-3

Talarigo can take some of the most horrific experiences a human being might face and craft breathtakingly beautiful, haunting works of fiction. His luminous 2004 debut, *The Pearl Diver*, about the forced confinement of tuberculosis victims in mid-20th-century Japan, was unforgettable. His latest, *The Ginseng Hunter*, chronicles a year in the life of a middle-aged Chinese man who lives alone on his family farm, located along the Tumen River that marks the border between rural China and devastated North Korea. His quiet, isolated life is interrupted by the desperate survivors who risk all to escape the deprivation and terror of their North Korean homeland. While too many others have chosen betrayal in order to survive, the farmer chooses to take grave risks in order to save even the so-called enemy—and hold on to his own humanity.

Binu and the Great Wall:

The Myth of Meng, Su Tong
Translated From the Chinese by
Howard Goldblatt
Canongate, \$24.00 cloth,
ISBN 978-1-841-95915-3

Part of Canongate's much-praised Myths Series. Su Tong—best known stateside for his novella *Raise the Red Lantern*, which became an Oscar-nominated film by legendary Zhang Yimou—breathes life into one of China's oldest myths. Binu is a devoted wife who leaves her native village to search for her missing husband, one of thousands of workers kidnapped to build the Great Wall.

GRAPHIC NOVELS

Fairy Tail (vols. 1 and 2), Hiro Mashima

Translated From the Japanese by
William Flanagan
Del Rey Manga/Ballantine, \$10.95 each paper,
ISBN 978-0-345-50133-2; 978-0-345-50330-5

The first two volumes of one of Japan's top 10 manga bestsellers make their stateside debut. Join the over-the-top adventures of newly inducted magic-key-carrying wizard Lucy (did she have to be so Barbie-like? Please!), motion-challenged fire wizard Natsu, and his cat Happy who sprouts wings as necessary. The bad guys never had a chance. For the 13-plus audiences, but adults will have fun, too, checking out what their kids can't get enough of.

Ral & Grad (vol. 1), Tsuneo Takano

Art by Takeshi Obata
Translated From the Japanese by Tony Cusdin,
English Adaptation by Kelly Sue DeConnick
VIZ Media, \$7.99 cloth,
ISBN 978-1-4215-1890-9

Marked with a "Parental Advisory," this is not your regular kiddie fare. Imprisoned in darkness since birth, Ral and his powerful shadow dragon, Grad, who shares Ral's very being, are finally released at age 15 to save their world, currently under attack by evil shadow legions. In the light, curiously naive Ral becomes instantly enamored of breasts and the women attached to them. Given his new obsession, his lifelong goal is to protect and preserve the female race. Guided by his ever-patient tutor, Ms. Mio, Ral, and Grad together are the only hope for future salvation.

Skim, Mariko Tamaki
Illustrated by Jillian Tamaki
Groundwood Books/PGW, \$18.95 cloth,
ISBN 978-0-88899-753-1

Meet Kimberly Keiko Cameron, aka "Skim," a wannabe witch navigating her angst-filled teenage life in a 1990s Toronto high school. In this book created by cousins Mariko and Jillian, making their fabulous collaborative debut, Skim manages to survive the first half of 10th grade—not an easy feat, dealing with parents' separation, suicide, depression, questions of homosexuality, challenging friendships, and maybe falling in love.

YOUNG ADULT READERS

She's So Money, Cherry Cheva

HarperTeen, \$16.99 cloth,
ISBN 978-0-06-128855-5

Get ready for some rollicking fun with this debut novel about super-overachieving Maya, the perfect daughter who gets all A's and still manages to help out in her parents' Thai restaurant. One small slip-up while her parents are away and she needs to find some major cash, fast. Her only choice is to team up with the odious but wealthy Camden King. But crime never pays, does it?

Revolution Is Not a Dinner Party

Ying Chang Compestine
Holt, \$16.95 cloth, ISBN 978-0-8050-8207-4

Best known for her highly entertaining picture books (*The Runaway Rice Cake*, *The Real Story of Stone Soup*), Compestine enters the YA market with a story that draws on her own childhood during the crushing Cultural Revolution in China. As the beloved only child of two doctors in Wuhan, eight-year-old Ling is forced to grow up quickly when one of Mao's political officers moves in next door, setting off a chain of tragic events Ling must endure and ultimately escape.

Snow Falling in Spring: Coming of Age in China During the Cultural Revolution

Moying Li
Melanie Kroupa/FSG, \$16.00 cloth,
ISBN 978-0-374-39922-1

The Cultural Revolution was a harrowing decade of Chinese history. Moying Li recalls her life from ages 12 to 22, when she bore witness to brutal atrocities against her family, friends, and entire community—and the indomitable spirit that somehow allowed her to survive.

The Year of the Rat, Grace Lin
Little, Brown, \$14.99 cloth,
ISBN 978-0-316-11426-4

Grace Lin uses her own childhood adventures in her second YA title, the follow-up to last year's successful *The Year of the Dog*. Pacy returns for another year of change and growth, with some tears and laughter thrown in.

Child of Dandelions, Shenaaz Nanji
Front Street, \$17.95 cloth,
ISBN 978-1-932425-93-2

When the brutal dictator Idi Amin violently grabbed power over Uganda, he declared in August 1972, that within 90 days all Indians would have to leave the country. Part of Uganda's population since the 16th century, Indians played a vital role in the development and growth of the East African economy. Fifteen-year-old Sabine and her family, multigenerational Ugandans of Indian heritage, cannot believe the mandate will be carried out. But as friendships are tested, relatives and friends vanish and violence and murder rule the day, they must make life-changing decisions with alacrity—and hope that these hasty decisions will save their lives.

Keeping Score, Linda Sue Park
Clarion, \$16.00 cloth, ISBN 978-0-618-92799-9

Maggie is the youngest in a family of baseball lovers. While she might not play herself—girls usually didn't in the 1950s—she knows the game inside and out. She hangs out with guys at the firehouse where her father used to work (until an accident moved him to a desk job), where she meets the latest recruit, Jim, who shows her how to keep detailed score of every game. When Jim is shipped to the front lines of the Korean War, Maggie writes to him regularly about the baseball season back home. When his letters stop coming, Maggie understandably worries, and when she finds out why, she devises a new plan to try to help Jim. This latest title from the Newbery Award-winner proves to be another remarkable and important historical lesson packaged in an engaging read.

First Daughter: White House Rules
Mitali Perkins
Dutton/Penguin, \$16.99 cloth,
ISBN 978-0-525-47951-2

Sameera Righton, who first appeared in *First Daughter: Extreme American Make-over*, now calls the White House “home.” Sparrow, as her parents call her, is the adopted daughter of the new U.S. president and his first lady. Living under 24/7 scrutiny is harder than she expected,

but being a resourceful teen, escape doesn't remain impossible for long. Let the adventures begin!

Climbing the Stairs, Padma Venkatraman
Putnam Juvenile, \$16.99 cloth,
ISBN 978-0-399-24746-0

India in the 1940s is a time of tumultuous violence—the British troops are subduing independence efforts, citizens of different religious backgrounds are fighting each other, World War II is raging in Europe, and the rest of Asia threatens to invade the Indian sub-continent. Vidya is just 15 with dreams of going to college—unheard of for traditional, upper-caste women at the time. When her father suffers an irreversible brain injury during an independence rally gone awry, Vidya's family returns to her father's ancestral home where they must learn to live with conservative, constricting relatives. Vidya's only escape from the stifling atmosphere is the long staircase that leads up to her grandfather's vast library.

**The Dragon's Child:
A Story of Angel Island**

Laurence Yep With Dr. Kathleen S. Yep
HarperCollins Children's, \$15.99 cloth,
ISBN 978-0-060-27692-8

Based on more than 80-year-old actual immigration interviews, Yep imagines the conversation he never had with his father about his father's experiences as a nervous young boy who arrived on Angel Island, the West Coast immigration station primarily for incoming Chinese, to live with his father, a virtual stranger. Working together with his Asian American Studies professor niece, Yep re-creates a most poignant story of a father and son who travel thousands of miles away from all that is familiar to become Americans.

Mia and Bravo, Mia! Laurence Yep
American Girl, \$6.95 each paper,
ISBN 978-1-59369-409-8; 978-1-59369-410-4

The ever-prolific Yep has penned a brand-new American Girls series featuring Mia, a talented skater who chooses figure skating over the ice hockey she's grown up playing with her three older brothers. Dedicated and tenacious, Mia not only learns about becoming a championship figure skater but also soon realizes that her actions off the ice are just as important—if not more so—as her performances on it.

AND FOR THE YOUNGER KIDDIES

The Blue Stone: A Journey Through Life
Jimmy Liao, Translated From the Chinese by Sarah L. Thomson
Little Brown, \$16.99 cloth,
ISBN 978-0-316-11383-0

A beautiful blue stone “lies peacefully in the heart of a forest” for thousands of years until someone decides he wants it, splits it in two, and takes half away. The separated half will travel the world in many incarnations—as an elephant, a bird, a fish, and finally a shattered heart—each time breaking apart bit by bit, longing for home. It's a gorgeous book for both children and adults to share. Go ahead: Cuddle up and rejoice in a few precious moments of peaceful reunion.

A Song for Cambodia, Michelle Lord
Illustrated by Shino Arihara
Lee & Low, \$16.95 cloth,
ISBN 978-1-60060-139-2

Arn Chorn-Pond was just eight when he was torn from his family in 1975 as the Khmer Rouge invaded Cambodia. He survives years of unimaginable atrocities with only rare moments of music to soothe his suffering soul. When he's finally rescued and eventually arrives in America as an adoptee at 14, he again turns to music to quell the nightmares. The book's afterword offers a look at Arn's courageous adult life.

Zen Ties, Jon J. Muth
Scholastic, \$17.99 cloth,
ISBN 978-0-439-63425-0

I confess: I'm a Muth addict, even though technically my kids are too old for his picture books. But really, his books are ageless and we can all learn some major life lessons from them. *Zen Ties* is Muth's enthralling follow-up to his Caldecott Honor Book, *Zen Shorts*: It's both an artistic stunner and a literary gem. Giant panda Stillwater and his adorable visiting nephew Koo, who speaks only in haiku (get it?), guide siblings Karl, Addy, and Michael to befriend their elderly neighbor, Miss Whitaker.

The Wakame Gatherers, Holly Thompson

Illustrated by Kazumi Wilds

Shen's Books, \$16.95 cloth,

ISBN 978-1-885008-33-6

Young Nanami shares an afternoon with her two grandmothers: her *Baachan* who lives with her family in Japan, and her Gram, who is visiting from the coast of Maine. Together the three share an ancient tradition of gathering seaweed and learn much about each other in the process. A poignant tale about how no matter where we're from, we're really not so different after all.

Rosie and Buttercup, Chieri Uegaki

Illustrated by Stéphane Jorisch

Kids Can Press, \$17.95 cloth,

ISBN 978-1-55337-997-3

Rosie has a near-perfect life, even an adorable little sister. But as Buttercup gets older, Rosie sometimes finds it challenging to get along with her. One day she takes her sister to their neighbor, offering her to him "for free." Back in her now-quiet home, Rosie finds life without Buttercup isn't quite as fun as she thought it would be, and maybe sharing with her sister is better than no sister at all. ■