

## Asian American Literature

Even as recently as two decades ago, the average reader was probably not familiar with so-called “Asian American literature.” Perhaps the reader could name a single title or author, but to consider it a genre of literature would most likely have been thought of by the general public as somewhat premature.

The first true “breakthrough” title into the mainstream appeared in 1976 with the publication of Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, a multi-award winning (including the National Book Critics Circle Award for best nonfiction) memoir on growing up Chinese American in a predominantly white world. According to Bill Moyers in his *A World of Ideas* (volume 2), *The Woman Warrior*, together with Hong Kingston’s follow-up work, *China Men*, became “the most widely taught books by a living American author on college campuses during the 1980s.” In spite of its undeniable critical, academic, even commercial success, not to mention having a major publishing house behind it (Alfred A. Knopf), *The Woman Warrior*, nor its venerable author, quite became household names.

Then came the surprise success of *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan in 1989. Not until Tan made publishing history with her meteoric rise to the top of the bestseller charts, her history-making seven-digit sales of paperback rights and her subsequent bank-breaking advances did the general public become fully conscious of the Asian American novel—like a brick falling on someone’s head. Publishers immediately saw dollar signs. And major houses began to take chances on

brand new, unproven writers with such ethnic hybrid names as Chang-rae Lee, Gish Jen, Cynthia Kadohata, Belle Yang and Gus Lee...and they received almost instant payback. A new niche popular market was born. And it’s been growing exponentially ever since.

### A Working Definition

In spite of what seems to be a recent (rather splashy) public entry into the publishing mainstream, the concept of “Asian American literature” is hardly a new fad or passing phenomenon. Books written by people of Asian ancestry have been around for over a century, just as considerable numbers of Asian Americans have made their home in the U.S. since the 1850s. And while the term “Asian American literature” might imply a sense of homogeneity, the breadth of included titles cannot be described in a single sentence or even a paragraph, just as the diverse, individual writers cannot be circumscribed by a single narrow definition.

For the purposes of this inaugural edition of *What Do I Read Next? Multicultural Literature*, “Asian American literature” has been approached as an inclusive term. These 240 entries are the works of diverse authors of Asian Pacific heritage, including Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, Vietnamese, Hawaiian, East Indian and South Pacific backgrounds. A few Canadian American writers are also included. And, as a reflection of America’s melting pot

characteristic, a number of mixed Asian heritage writers such as Chinese Scottish American Ruthanne Lum McCunn and Chinese Eurasian American Diana Chang are listed, as well. Multigenerations of Asian Americans are found here, from fifth-generation Chinese American Frank Chin to Indian American Bharati Mukherjee who immigrated to the U.S. in her twenties and later became a naturalized Canadian citizen.

The thousands of pages represented in these entries are just as diverse as their authors. This survey of Asian American literature encompasses stories as diverse as Filipino American Carlos Bulosan's immigrant experiences in *America Is in the Heart*, Japanese American Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston's memories of the World War II Japanese internment crisis in *A Farewell to Manzanar*, Japanese American Lydia Minatoya's search for her hyphenated Asian American identity in *Talking to High Monks in the Snow: An Asian American Odyssey*, Sri Lankan Canadian Shyam Selvadurai's fictionalized account of his experiences in his homeland before arriving in America in *Funny Boy*, or Korean American Helie Lee's search for her grandmother's North Korean past in *Still Life With Rice: A Young American Woman Discovers the Life and Legacy of Her Korean Grandmother*. Still others wrote non-ethnic-specific books with or without characters who just might (or might not) happen to be Asian American, such as Lowry Pei's coming-of-age tale, *Family Resemblances*, or Vikram Seth's novel in verse about five friends, *The Golden Gate*, or Cynthia Kadohata's futuristic story, *In the Heart of the Valley of Love*.

While the majority of the entries are of titles published in the last two decades, groundbreaking earlier works such as Chinese Eurasian American Edith Maude Eaton's *Mrs. Spring Fragrance and Other Writings*, collected short stories written (and many originally published) almost a century ago under the pseudonym Sui Sin Far, or Japanese American Monica Sone's *Nisei Daughter*, a memoir of growing up during the 1920s to '40s in Washington State, are also included. [Not included among the historically important texts are those that are not readily available because they are either published by an obscure small press or no longer in print such as Korean American Younghill Kang's *East Goes West: The Making of an Oriental Yankee*, originally published in 1937 by Charles Scribner's Sons.]

The works here represent a spectrum for readers as

well, from picture books for children to young adult titles to adult literature that includes not only fiction, but drama, history, personal memoirs and poetry. Anthologies are especially helpful in offering a varied overview of types of Asian American literature, sometimes as specific as *Our Feet Walk the Sky: Women of the South Asian Diaspora*, edited by the Women of South Asian Descent Collective, or as broad as *Charlie Chan Is Dead: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Fiction*, edited by Jessica Hagedorn.

### A Brief Historical Overview

Asian Americans became a piece of the American ethnic pie during the 1850s when large numbers of Chinese laborers entered the U.S. and went to work building the transcontinental railroads, and later tending endless crop fields—work that required long hours of back-breaking, often life-threatening labor for unjustly meager wages. A significant flow of Japanese immigrants followed the Chinese during the turn of the century, while small numbers of Korean and Filipino transplants entered the U.S. during the early decades of the 1900s. Segregated from the already established towns and work camps, these Asian immigrants were forced to establish their own peripheral communities, maintaining their native language and customs. Under such conditions of being overworked, living in impoverished conditions and forced into cultural and linguistic isolation, these immigrants hardly had the time, the means nor possibly the inclination to produce an early generation of writers. In addition, among Asian cultures, “talk story,” or the oral tradition, was traditionally the preferred mode of passing on tales from generation to generation.

Not surprisingly, the earliest known published work in English by a writer of Asian heritage was not written by an immigrant laborer, but a Yale University graduate, a young man who was sent to the U.S. by the Chinese government in the 1870s as one of a select group of Chinese boys to receive a Western education. Lee Yan Phou's *When I Was a Boy in China*, published in 1887, was hardly an account of the early Asian American immigrant experience; rather, as its title suggests, it focused on Lee's childhood in China, describing Chinese games and sports, food, traditional ceremonies and folk tales. More importantly, Lee's treatise was the first of more than a century's worth of literature that attempted to dispel the growing

stereotypes and misconceptions of Asians—in Lee's case, to reclaim the rich Chinese culture that had been sullied by the racism that gave birth to the insulting "Ching Chong Chinaman"-type epithets and slurs. Even today, the bulk of Asian American literature, on some level, tries to project valid, accurate accounts of the Asian American experience, at the same time fighting the media's caricature images of Asian Americans as the "yellow peril," the Confucius-quoting "Number One Son," the "dragon lady," Fu Manchu, the "inscrutable Oriental," and the like.

Approximately a decade after Lee's autobiographical work appeared, two Chinese English Canadian sisters made literary history with the publication of what is today believed to be the first works of true Asian American fiction. Edith Maude Eaton, writing under the name Sui Sin Far, began publishing various essays, short stories and journalistic articles during the 1880s; in 1896, her short story, "The Gamblers," was the first fiction piece that dealt specifically with the Asian North American experience. [Largely ignored during the last century, Sui Sin Far's works have experienced a revival in the last decade, with inclusion in numerous anthologies as well as a recently published collection of her short stories, *Mrs. Spring Fragrance and Other Writings*.] Edith's sister, Winifred Lillie Eaton, writing as Onoto Watanna, published the novel *Miss Nume of Japan* in 1899; in marked difference to her sister's writings, *Miss Nume*, along with Winifred's later works, were all set in Asia.

Understandably, since the majority of early Asian Americans were of Chinese and Japanese descent, Asian American literature was initially dominated by Chinese American and Japanese American voices. Moreover, due to strict anti-Asian immigration laws from the 1880s to the 1940s, the Asian American community hardly had an opportunity to grow, much less become more diverse.

Although most of the early Asian American writers during the first half of the twentieth century wrote from their own experiences, producing such titles as Etsu Sugimoto's *A Daughter of the Samurai* (1925), Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1945) and Lin Yutang's *A Chinatown Family* (1948), these works were, for the most part, far removed from the harsh realities of blatant racism and economic deprivation virtually synonymous with the Asian American

experience at the time. An exception to this group of works was Carlos Bulosan's *American Is in the Heart* (1946) which achingly depicted the author's difficult struggles and failed attempts to establish himself as an accepted member of American society.

With the advent of World War II, a new direction in Asian American literature emerged. Between 1942 and 1945, some 120,000 Americans of Japanese descent, two-thirds of whom were U.S. citizens *by birth*, were incarcerated in 10 concentration camps throughout the West. Caught as scapegoats in a national hysteria against the Japanese following the December 7, 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor and fearing the possibility of Japanese American collusion with the Japanese government, then-President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 which resulted in the cattle-like round-up and unjust imprisonment of Japanese Americans.

Two of the earliest writings about the tragic experience was Mine Okubo's 1946 illustrated memoir *Citizen 13660* and Hisaye Yamamoto's 1950 short story, "The Legend of Miss Sasagawara." Other accounts of the experience would not appear until decades later; the older Japanese Americans were silenced by the traumatic event, surviving emotionally and mentally by telling themselves, "*shigata ga nai* (it can't be helped; nothing can be done)," and hiding what they believed to be a shameful part of the past, "*kodomo no tame ni* (for the sake of the children)." Not until the 1970s was that silence finally broken, resulting in a virtual rush of internment experience-inspired literature, including such notable works as Momoko Iko's play *The Gold Watch*, about a Japanese American family caught in the racist fervor on the eve of the evacuation order, John Okada's novel *No-No Boy*, about a young Japanese American man who refused to take the U.S. loyalty oath and risk his life fighting for the country that unjustly imprisoned him, Yoshiko Uchida's memoir *Desert Exile: The Uprooting of a Japanese American Family*, about the Uchida family's experiences at Camp Topaz, and Ken Mochizuki's children's book, *Baseball Saved Us*, about how a group of young internees endured the tedium of their imprisonment in part by playing baseball behind barbed wire.

Perhaps partially in response to the civil rights movement starting to take shape in the 1960s, U.S. immigration laws were considerably eased by 1965, and

a new wave of Asian immigrants began to arrive in considerable numbers. These new citizens-to-be changed the landscape of a predominantly Chinese and Japanese Asian America; a new influx of Koreans, Taiwanese, Filipinos, East Indians, Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians, Singaporeans, Sri Lankans, and other South Pacific Islanders arrived on American shores, bringing different languages, age-old traditions, unfamiliar customs, diverse foods and new names to add to the polyglot of American society.

The Asian American community burst forth with previously unheard, long ignored voices. The publication in 1974 of the groundbreaking anthology, *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers*, edited by Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada and Shawn Wong, first by a small independent press and later by a major New York publishing giant (Penguin Group), announced to the public the flourishing existence of Asian American literature. As the list of Asian American titles and Asian American authors grew, the academic world was the first to take notice, especially universities in California (where the largest Asian American populations are found) which began to offer classes in Asian American literature. These and other related classes on the Asian American experience eventually evolved into Asian American Studies departments, a trend that is slowly spreading nationwide.

### Asian American Literature Today

By the mid-1980s, Asian Americans were reclaiming their life stories and experiences in a trend that continues to grow stronger even today. For the first time, large numbers of Asian Americans were telling their stories, in their own words. Following in the literary footsteps of such early pioneering memoirs as Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* and Monica Sone's *Nisei Daughter*, which accurately depicted the often harsh realities of life as an immigrant or even as an American-born Asian American, other Asian Americans reclaimed their misrepresented, silenced past in such life-affirming memoirs as Mary Paik Lee's *Quiet Odyssey: A Pioneer Korean Woman in America* and Lydia Minatoya's *Talking to High Monks in the Snow: An Asian American Odyssey*, as well as various anthologies including *Growing Up Asian American*, edited by Maria Hong, *Under Western Eyes: Personal Essays from Asian America*, edited by Garrett Hong

and *East to America: Korean American Life Stories*, edited by Elaine H. Kim and Eui-Young Yu.

In the midst of the emergence of more and more Asian American voices, two breakthrough events catapulted Asian American literature into the mainstream market. In March 1988, David Henry Hwang's gender-bender, Tony Award-winning drama, *M. Butterfly*, debuted on Broadway. Based on a story Hwang heard about a French diplomat who was involved in a 20-year affair with a male Chinese spy whom he believed to be a woman, the play became one of the most successful non-musical works in Broadway history. It was produced in three dozen countries around the world and grossed over \$35 million. At age 32, Hwang was an international phenomenon. *Time* magazine referred to him as "potential[ly] ... the first important dramatist of American public life since Arthur Miller, and maybe the best of them all." The drama world had a bonafide, bankable Asian American star.

Then came Amy Tan's overnight sensation, *The Joy Luck Club*. Published in 1989 to unheard of success, the novel about the relationships between four Chinese mothers, who meet every week to play mahjong and share their lives, and their four American-born daughters, opened new doors for a proliferation of other writers of Asian descent.

New anthologies collected the neglected older works of such talented writers as Hisaye Yamamoto in *Seventeen Syllables and Other Stories* and Wakako Yamauchi in *Songs My Mother Taught Me: Stories, Plays, and Memoir*, at the same time showcasing the debut pieces of new, unknown names. Asian American women writers found new representation in a significant number of women-only collections, such as *Making Waves: An Anthology of Writings By and About Asian American Women* edited by Asian Women United, *The Forbidden Stitch: An Asian American Women's Anthology* edited by Shirley Geok-lin Lim, *Home to Stay: Asian American Women's Fiction* edited by Sylvia Watanabe and Carol Bruchac, and *Her Mother's Ashes and Other Stories by South Asian Women in Canada and the United States* edited by Nurjehan Aziz.

Moreover, writers who had been previously

published by smaller presses picked up contracts with major publishers. For example, Shawn Wong's debut novel *Homebase* was originally published by independent small press I. Reed Books in 1979, and later went out of print before being reissued by Penguin in 1991; his second novel, *American Knees*, was published by Simon and Schuster in 1995. Lois-Ann Yamanaka's first work *Saturday Night at the Pahala Theatre*, was produced by Bamboo Ridge Press in 1993; three years later, her novel *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers*, was published by Farrar Straus Giroux.

Fiction writers were not the only writers pushed into the mainstream limelight. Poet Garrett Hongo garnered a Pulitzer Prize nomination with his 1988 collection, *The River of Heaven*, published by Alfred A. Knopf. Professor Ronald Takaki was also nominated for a Pulitzer with his 1989 history text, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*, published by Little, Brown and Company.

The late 1980s and 1990s have also witnessed a near explosion of Asian American titles for children. Veterans Allen Say, Laurence Yep and Ed Young have been joined by newcomers Sheila Hamanaka, Huy Voun Lee, Jeanne M. Lee, Ken Mochizuki and Chyng Feng Sun, to name a few. Many recent children's books are also finding inspiration in new retellings and adaptations of traditional folktales and legends of Asian origin, such as Charlie Chin's *China's Bravest Girl*, based on the legend of the Chinese woman warrior Fa Mu Lan, Demi's *Liang and the Magic Paintbrush*, about a young boy whose drawings come to life, or Nami Rhee's *Magic Spring: A Korean Folktale*, about a kind old couple who discover the fountain of youth.

The young adult market, too, has progressed tremendously in the 1990s, although this section of the publishing sector has the most room for potential growth. Again Laurence Yep has been an established name in the field for over two decades, as has the late Yoshiko Uchida. Joining them are Sook Nyul Choi, with her trilogy—*Year of Impossible Goodbyes*, *Echoes of the White Giraffe* and *Gathering of Pearls*—about a young Korean girl's experiences during the Korean War and her eventual immigration to the U.S., Marie G. Lee and her three titles—*Finding My Voice*, *If It Hadn't Been for Yoon Jun* and *Saying Goodbye*—

focusing on growing up Korean American, and Lensey Namioka's more recent works such as *April and the Dragon Lady*, *Yang the Youngest and His Terrible Ear* and *Yang the Third and Her Impossible Family* about coming of age as a Chinese American.

Just as the Asian American population has grown vastly in the last two decades, Asian American literature has also developed in parallel, constantly adding new authors, new titles, and even founding new Asian American-oriented publishing houses. At the same time, Asian American literature is finding a larger, more encompassing audience without ethnic boundaries.

Ironically, as the field of Asian American literature develops and broadens, it will ultimately outgrow itself because someday, such defined, exclusive ethnic terms as Asian American, African American, Latino or Native American will no longer be necessary in the multicultural American society of the future. And in this potentially tolerant, fluid world, even a reference guide such as this, which is much needed today, will hopefully render itself obsolete.

### Publishing information

The majority of the titles listed should be accessible to readers throughout the country's libraries and book stores, since many are published by major presses. Two smaller presses whose titles are widely distributed nationally, University of Washington Press in Seattle, Washington and Coffee House Press in Minneapolis, Minnesota, offer numerous Asian American titles: University of Washington Press specializes in reprinting classics such as Carlos Bulosan's *America Is in the Heart* and Diana Chang's *Frontiers of Love*, while Coffee House focuses on more recent works such as Frank Chin's *Donald Duk* and *Gunga Din Highway* and M. Evelina Galang's *Her Wild American Self*. Three other small presses specifically publish Asian and Asian Pacific American titles only: Bamboo Ridge Press in Honolulu, Hawaii, which specializes in Hawaiian authors, and also offers a literary quarterly, *Bamboo Ridge: The Hawaii Writers' Quarterly*; the recently founded Kaya Production in New York, New York, which focuses on contemporary Asian American writers [Kaya also plans to begin a series of reclaiming out-of-print Asian

American classics, such as Younghill Kang's *East Goes West*.]; and Polychrome Publishing in Chicago, Illinois, which specializes in Asian American children and young adult titles.

### Some Favorite Titles

The following is a list of books (organized by audience type, alphabetically by author) from the 240 included entries which were personal favorites. They do not necessarily represent the most critically acclaimed or most commercially successful titles.

#### For children:

*Children of Asian America* by the Asian American Coalition

*Halmoni and the Picnic* by Sook Nyul Choi

*Heroes* by Ken Mochizuki

*Aekyung's Dream* by Min Paek

*Dumpling Soup* by Jama Kim Rattigan

*Grandfather's Journey* by Alley Say

*Mama Bear* by Chyng Feng Sun

*Ashok by Any Other Name* by Sandra Yamate

#### For young adults:

*Finding My Voice* by Marie G. Lee

*Shizuko's Daughter* by Kyoko Mori

*American Dragons: Twenty-Five Asian American Voices* edited by Laurence Yep

#### For adults:

*Typical American* by Gish Jen

*Three Filipino Women* by F. Sionil Jose

*East to America: Korean American Life Stories* edited by Elaine H. Kim and Eui-Young Yu

*Dancer Dawkins and the California Kid* by Willyce Kim

*Native Speaker* by Chang-rae Lee

*Pangs of Love* by David Wong Louie

*Bombay Talkie* by Ameena Meer

*Talking to High Monks in the Snow: An Asian American Odyssey* by Lydia Minatoya

*Jasmine* by Bharati Mukherjee

*Love, Stars and All That* by Kirin Narayan

*A Feather on the Breath of God* by Sigrid Nunez

*The Golden Gate* by Vikram Seth

*Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers* by Lois-Ann Yamanaka

*Baba: A Return to China Upon My Father's Shoulders* by Belle Yang

### Asian American Literary Publications

*Amerasia Journal*. Los Angeles: The Asian American Studies Center, University of California at Los Angeles.

*The Asian Pacific American Journal*. New York: The Asian American Writers Workshop.

*Asian/Pacific American Women's Journal*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan.

*Bamboo Ridge: The Hawaii Writers' Quarterly*. Honolulu: Bamboo Ridge Press.

### Suggested Literary Criticism Texts

Cheung, King-Kok and Stan Yogi. *Asian American Literature: An Annotated Bibliography*. New York: The Modern Language Association, 1988.

Chin, Frank, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada and Shawn Wong, ed. *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers*. New York: Mentor (Penguin Group), 1974.

———. *The Big Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature*. New York: Meridian (Penguin Group), 1991.

Hsu, Kai-yu and Helen Palubinskas, eds. *Asian American Authors*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972.

Kim, Elaine H. *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982.

Lim, Shirley Geok-lin and Amy Ling, ed. *Reading the Literatures of Asian America*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992.

Wong, Sau-Ling. *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.