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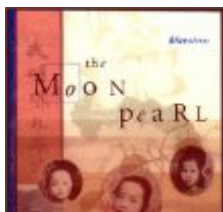
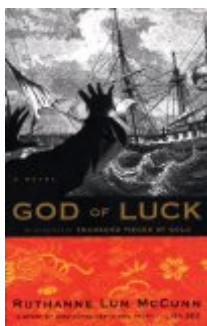
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## March 2010

### [Terry Hong](#)

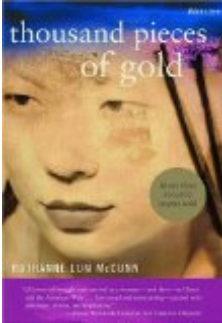
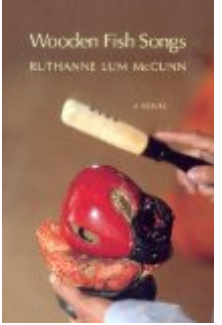
#### [features](#)

#### An Interview with Ruthanne Lum McCunn



Through the decades, Ruthanne Lum McCunn has built a lauded career giving voice to spirited, groundbreaking heroes of Asian descent. Growing up in a large, extended family in Hong Kong, McCunn, who is half Chinese and half Scottish American, was surrounded by strong, independent women to inspire her. Her titles include [Sole Survivor](#) (1985), about a Chinese sailor who miraculously survived 133 days adrift in the Atlantic Ocean after his ship was sunk during World War II; [Wooden Fish Songs](#) (1995), in which three very different women present the life of a Chinese American immigrant to whom they are somehow related; [The Moon Pearl](#) (2000), about a group of brave young women in 1830s China who refused to accept arranged marriages and vowed to live independent lives as spinsters; and her latest [God of Luck](#) (2007), which tells the story of one Chinese man among thousands who were kidnapped and sold into slavery in the mid-nineteenth century to work in the deadly guano mines in faraway Peru.

More than merely appreciating McCunn's many titles, I also owe her an unrepayable debt of literary gratitude. Decades ago, her children's classic, [Pie-Biter](#), was the book that sparked my initial interest in Asian American literature. I can't emphasize enough just how important finding *Pie-Biter* was to my literary development. As the first *bona fide* children's picture book by an Asian American author that celebrates the Asian American experience, *Pie-Biter* is based on a real-life Chinese immigrant



boy who arrives in the American West in the late 1800s to work on the transcontinental railroads and, as tall tales go, gets his strength from eating pies.

Even though I'm not Chinese American (although the Hong side of my family originated in China 46 generations ago), and even though I don't have direct ancestors who built the transcontinental railroad, *Pie-Biter* offers a collective historical past with which I can identify as an Asian American today. Stories like *Pie-Biter* allowed me to voice my discomfort about growing up without books that spoke to my own experience. Contrast McCunn's book -- her very many books, actually! -- to something like the still-popular [The Five Chinese Brothers](#) which is all about the exotic and foreign. Instead, *Pie-Biter* is a piece of genuine history with none of the cloying made-up exoticism seen through someone else's eyes.

Of all of McCunn's many books, her debut novel [Thousand Pieces of Gold](#) (1981) remains her signature work. Based on the life of a nineteenth-century Chinese American pioneer woman, *Thousand Pieces of Gold* is almost three decades old, has had countless printings, has never been out of print, is available in eight languages, is ubiquitous on high school and college reading lists, and has even been made into a PBS film of the same name.

So when a galley arrived late last year which seemed to be about Polly Bemis, said Chinese American pioneer woman, I immediately thought of McCunn's now-classic. I ended up reviewing Christopher Corbett's [The Poker Bride: The First Chinese in the Wild West](#) for a major newspaper, and will admit reading it to be a frustrating experience. And so I contacted McCunn, and we started chatting about history, authenticity, writing, and so much more...

**You're *hapa*, Scottish on one side, Chinese on the other; why the focus only on your Chinese side in your writing?**

I grew up in Hong Kong in my mother's Chinese family and didn't come to America until I started college. Even now, after decades in the U.S.A., I feel like an immigrant. Maybe I always will. As a little blond girl growing up in Hong Kong, though, I was very much an outsider, including within my family. Not just because of color, but interests -- my love of books, to name just one. Similarly, the people I've written about -- whether Chinese, White, Black, or Latino -- have been outsiders because of characteristics beyond color and ethnicity. Just as the people I'm closest to in my life are outsiders.

**Might you explore your Scottish side at some point?**

I'm certainly not opposed to the possibility.

**Let's go back to your first novel, *Thousand Pieces of Gold*; some might also call it your signature title. What's the back story of how you came to write that?**

I was a teacher and want-to-be writer researching Chinese in the West when I stumbled upon a sketch about Lalu Nathoy, who was sold by her father to bandits during a drought in 1870s northern China, then shipped to San Francisco and auctioned off to a saloon keeper in an Idaho mining camp, where she was renamed Polly and won her freedom through a poker game. I instantly knew I had to find out more and write a book about her. After all, how many writers are gifted with such an incredible plot? Better yet, Polly was an amazing human being whose spirit and generosity were legendary. She reminded me so much of my own great-grandmother who was also born in northern China and sold into slavery.

### **Why didn't you write about your great-grandmother?**

As a girl dreaming about becoming a writer, I'd actually intended to write about her. Living in America, however, the mythology that passes for American history was driving me crazy, and by writing about Lalu/Polly, I could reveal a part of American history most people don't know about as well as tell a terrific story.

Maybe there were other forces at work, too. Before I began working on *Thousand Pieces of Gold*, a fortune-teller told me Lalu/Polly was holding my hand, and I certainly felt that as I was researching and writing about her. Then, after *Thousand Pieces of Gold* came out, I learned that my father, who'd died when I was a girl, had met Polly when he was a teenager working summer jobs as a fire watcher in Idaho.

### **Holy moly! Your father's the one who sent that story to you! His afterlife gift for sure!**

I like to think so, too. Although I never had the opportunity to know him, I've been told we're very much alike. He loved books and history. In fact, he apparently took the job as fire watcher so he could curl up on his perch and read!

**I can just imagine him on his (now heavenly) perch mesmerized by *Thousand Pieces of Gold*, maybe even reading to Polly herself (since she was illiterate ...)! They met in this life... absolutely believe they're hanging out in next, right? What I can't believe is that almost 30 years have passed since the book was first published! How has it changed and morphed since then? Do you feel differently about it now than when you started the project?**

As part of my research for *Thousand Pieces of Gold*, I went to Idaho and interviewed people who had known Polly. But after the book came out, I was contacted by more people who'd known her and shared more anecdotes. Also, an archivist who read *Thousand Pieces of Gold* noticed documents with her name on them in the National Archives. They'd been misfiled, so for all intents and purposes, lost, and the archivist gave me copies at a book signing.

There've been many translations of *Thousand Pieces of Gold*, and Tsoi Nuliang, the translator in China, did additional research through a contact at Beijing University and learned Lalu means either "Islam" or "long life" and her origins were most likely Daur, a minority in Mongolia that had settled in northern China and adapted to Chinese customs. Astonishingly, none of these discoveries contradicted the analyses and judgments I'd made about Lalu/Polly as a person for the novel, and I was able to add all the new information in an Afterword for a new edition which came out a few years ago.

Best of all, the Chinese and Mongolian translations of *Thousand Pieces of Gold* gave Lalu/Polly the opportunity to go back to where her life began, and her final cabin on the Salmon River is now a museum. Thousands of river rafters stop there each summer, so Polly, who was renowned for her hospitality, is still opening her home to visitors almost 80 years after her death!

**Okay, so time for true confessions of ulterior motives. You must have heard about the new book, *The Poker Bride*, by Christopher Corbett? The second I opened up the galley package, my first thought was "oh, Ruthanne has to know about this!" So now that I've read and reviewed it, here I am to bug you about it. Any first impressions to share?**

I chose *Thousand Pieces of Gold* as the title for my book because it's a Chinese term of endearment for daughters, and Lalu/Polly was certainly cherished in life -- and since her death. When I was on tour in Idaho for the new edition of *Thousand Pieces of Gold*, people drove hundreds of miles to my readings -- not because of me but because stories of Polly have been handed down in families and communities. So, to be honest, I find

calling Polly a “poker bride” insulting.

I also can't fathom why Corbett chose it for his title. He notes that according to the 1880 census, Polly was living with Charlie Bemis. So by then Polly's owner had obviously already lost her in the poker game. Corbett also notes that Charlie and Polly did not marry until 1894. Why, then, does Corbett call her a poker bride? She didn't become a bride until over 14 *years* after that winning game!

In any case, his subtitle, *The First Chinese in the Wild West*, is far more accurate because Lalu/Polly landed in San Francisco almost a quarter century after large numbers of Chinese began arriving and her story doesn't begin to be told until midway through the book. Given Corbett's extensive research, it's also curious why he repeats the mythology of Chinese as sojourners.

**Yes, I also wrote about that in a newspaper book review, and I recommended your *Thousand Pieces of Gold* as a far better alternative to the erroneously titled *Poker Bride*. Why do you think Corbett fails in telling Polly's story? His is supposed to be history, yours is fiction, after all...**

Trying to sort out contradicting facts and outright lies during my research certainly [made me realize] that just because something is labeled nonfiction doesn't make it true. As for why Corbett fails in telling Polly's story... I think the answer may lie in his bibliography. It's so extensive that Corbett must be a great researcher. Yet there are gaps that make me wonder whether he was cherry picking in order to support a preconceived thesis, which is really another way of skewing the truth.

**So let me bring up that problematic concept of authenticity. Remember how bestselling author Chang-rae Lee ([Native Speaker](#), [A Gesture Life](#)), who is Korean American, ruffled some feathers with his critically-acclaimed [Aloft](#), in which his main character is a white man? But Professor Jeannie Pfaelzer has won awards writing about the Chinese American experience in her *New York Times* Notable Book [Driven Out: The Forgotten War Against Chinese Americans](#). What do you think about an author writing outside his/her ethnic box? Is it possible for an author to write "authentically" about an experience not his or her own?**

If authors could only write about their own experiences, they'd be awfully limited! I wrote *Wooden Fish Songs* with three very different first person narrators -- Chinese, White, and Black -- although all women and all outsiders in their communities. *Sole Survivor* is from the point of view of a Chinese man who holds the Guinness World Record for survival at sea. *The Moon Pearl* is about girls in 1830s China who rebelled against marriage. *God of Luck* is about a couple who've been torn apart by the Pacific slave trade so the husband is digging guano in Peru and the wife is raising silkworms back home in China. None of these are my experiences any more than *Thousand Pieces of Gold* was, but that's what I love about being a writer *and* reader: I get to immerse myself entirely in different worlds through compelling characters and stories.

Clearly I've written outside my ethnic box -- and outside my gender! And, since I mostly write historical novels, outside of my centuries!

**Okay, so I have to get a bit pushy here... what about Arthur Golden, who got sued for stealing /maligning someone else's life with his bestselling (overwrought, exoticized) [Memoirs of a Geisha](#)? He's just one of a very long list of authors who have usurped someone else's culture, some else's history, and written some spectacle. Your writing outside of your experience as a *hapa* Chinese Scottish American capturing different moments in Chinese/Chinese American history, is very different than, say Claire Huchet Bishop, who wrote the still available, still cringe-inducing *The Five Chinese Brothers* -- which makes me have to thank you again for *Pie-Biter* -- which also brings me back to the "authenticity" question...**

When I came to America, I knew nothing about the country except what I'd seen in the movies, and we all know how authentic they are! I took American history in college, but everything in the textbooks and lectures was about White America. Not surprisingly, then, nobody I met knew much about the history of their particular ethnicity either. In graduate school, I finally learned the history of African Americans because I was in a progressive training program for people who wanted to teach in inner city schools. Then I happened to be living in Santa Barbara when the first Chicano Studies course in America was offered, so I signed up. The reason why I was researching about Chinese in the West was because there was nothing in my students' textbooks.

As for culture, I don't think being born into a particular group automatically confers cultural knowledge. Also, cultural norms vary widely. To write *Thousand Pieces of Gold*, for example, I had to research life in northern China which I knew nothing about -- and which is as different from southern China as American northern states are from the southern. Sure, my great-grandmother was from northern China, but she'd moved to Hong Kong when she was in her 30s, and the family I grew up in was completely southern. I can't begin to count the number of hours I spent studying about northern Chinese -- and I was thrilled that when the Chinese and Mongolian translations of *Thousand Pieces of Gold* came out and I was invited to visit, no one would believe it was my first trip.

Anyway, to be perfectly honest, the most challenging hurdle for me in my books hasn't been history or culture or gender but class. One of the women in *Wooden Fish Songs* came from a privileged New England family, and it literally took me YEARS to come to grips with her character! In large part, because I had to overcome long-held prejudices.

But that's exactly why I love to write -- and read. I get to go on voyages of discovery that gift me with new insights.

**If you could have a chat with Polly Bemis right now, what might you say? What might you say to Charlie?**

I'd thank Lalu/Polly for giving me the opportunity to write about her and tell her about all the people who've fallen in love with her, as I did. Then, I'd ask Charlie to tell me his story!

**So what titles are at your bedside? What are some must-reads for 2010?**

My bedside is always such an unbelievable heap of books that I'm beyond slut. I'm usually a serial slut: one book at a time. Right now, though, I'm reading other titles in conjunction with Sara Maitland's [A Book of Silence](#), which is a very beautiful, thought-provoking meditation on silence, with lots to savor and mull on, so between chapters, I dip into my pile.

I just started [Half Broke Horses](#) by Jeanette Walls, which is incredible, and a few of the titles waiting for me are: Jennifer Baszile's [The Black Girl Next Door](#), Alice McDermott's early novel, [That Night](#), which a friend recently said I must read, and [The Man in the Wooden Hat](#) by Jane Gardam who wrote [Old Filth](#), a book I thoroughly enjoyed a few years ago. FILTH is an acronym for a British expression -- Failed In London, Try Hong Kong -- and whereas *Old Filth* is from the "failure"'s point of view, the new novel is from his wife's.

Among the books I've recently finished and would heartily recommend are: [The Sealed Letter](#) by Emma Donoghue, which I read in one long, delicious gulp, and [The Two Kinds of Decay](#) by Sarah Manguso, which I borrowed from the library and liked so much that I bought a copy and have already reread -- and intend to reread again and again. I was thrilled to come across [her interview](#) in Bookslut.

The absolute MUST READ is [Strength in What Remains](#) by Tracy Kidder, which is so full of grace as well as

horror and is absolute proof that an author CAN write authentically, effectively, and with tremendous sensitivity outside of his or her ethnicity.

**Thank goodness for true chameleons! You yourself like change -- you've written fiction and nonfiction that have become much needed texts in classrooms, you've written for various ages and audiences ... any preference for genre?**

The story I'm writing dictates my approach. For example, *Pie-Biter* tells the story of two legendary packers that I came across in some oral histories during my research for *Thousand Pieces of Gold*, and it jumped out at me as the makings for a wonderful tall tale for children in the tradition of John Henry and Paul Bunyan.

I set out to write *Thousand Pieces of Gold* as nonfiction biography but so little is known about Lulu/Polly's life before her arrival in Idaho that I soon realized it would have to be a biographical novel.

**What's next for you?**

The only book I've never completed was the one I talked about while I was still writing. Maybe that would have happened anyway, but since then, I've been mum about what I'm working on. Sorry! I *can* say it's another historical novel based on a real person and within that, I'm experimenting with a new way of telling a story.

**How very authentically Asian of you... [I keep hearing to *not* talk about something until it happens is an Asian trait...]**

Well... authentically insecure for sure!

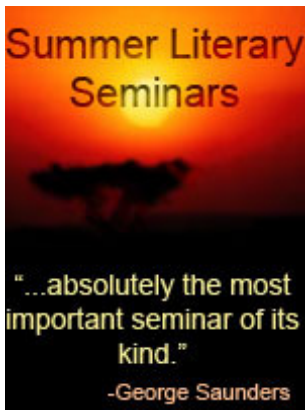
*Terry Hong is media arts consultant at the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Program. She writes a Smithsonian book blog at [bookdragon.si.edu](http://bookdragon.si.edu).*

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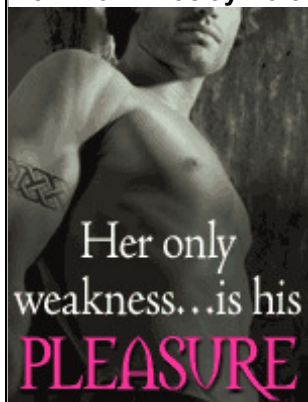
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