

THE PLAIN DEALER

Chia-Min Chen, Special to The Plain Dealer

Author draws readers into immigrants' lives

FICTION

Midnight at the Dragon Cafe

By Judy Fong Bates.

Counterpoint, 325 pp., \$14.

I naturally am attracted to the literature of cultural passage as someone who came with her family to this country decades ago. Over the years, there are many authors I have enjoyed but few I remember.

I did make a point of remembering Judy Fong Bates after reading her first book, "China Dog and Other Tales From a Chinese Laundry," a 2002 collection of short stories. Fong Bates depicted vivid lives of the desperate yet brave Chinese who immigrated in the early 1900s. They opened laundry shops in tiny hamlets, new frontiers that allowed them to eke out an existence and send money home to their families in China.

Fong Bates' new work did not disappoint me. "Midnight at the Dragon Cafe" is another page-turner because again the author paints the lives of people with her pen.

Her writing reminds me of Grandma Moses' painting — simple, direct and honest — eliciting a natural emotional response from readers. Although the Chou family in "Dragon Cafe" is fictional, the characters embody the experiences of people who live and struggle in a new land. The simplicity and honesty of Fong Bates' composition, like Grandma Moses' brush strokes, puts the readers right in the midst of "Dragon Cafe." We are in the Chou family "painting."

We experience the isolation, struggle, anguish, hidden emotions and, most of all, the past and current family secrets that bind and divide the Chous. The family settles among native-born Canadians in Irvine, a small town outside of

Toronto.

We board a plane with Su-Jen, the 6-year-old daughter, as she and her mother leave Hong Kong to join the father. Su-Jen only knows him from a small black-and-white photograph, taken in a faraway country called Gun-ah-dye (Canada), where snow covers the land and people speak only English. In this new place, everyone would be safe from bandits, pickpockets, beggars and communists. Su-Jen's parents sacrifice the old to live in this new land of strangers for her.

So she thought.

The reader accompanies Su-Jen and her mother on the train to Irvine. The sour odor of the tanning factory fills the nostrils and coats the throats. Su-Jen becomes the dividing wall in the double bed between her parents.

The pre-World War II past has nothing and everything to do with the Chou present. The war tore families apart and created unusual unions — marriage partners, siblings — which would not have aligned otherwise.

The reader peeks in "the half-drawn curtain . . . my long, dark [half-brother] on top of my pale, slender mother, their naked bodies coiled around each other like snakes." We share Su-Jen's confusion. Then, there is a mail-order bride, Mai-Yee, and Su-Jen's baby brother.

In this novel, the reader learns, alongside Su-Jen, how to swallow bitterness and save face for the family. That is how to survive and continue on.