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If Walls Could Talk

Reviewed by Ron Charles

MIDNIGHT AT THE DRAGON CAFÉ

By Judy Fong Bates. Counterpoint. 315 pp. Paperback, \$14

The irony of immigrant stories is that each revolves around an acute sense of difference, and yet they resemble one another so closely: The parents take a harrowing chance on a better life in a strange land; the children arrive bewildered but quickly assimilate, only to find themselves suspended between their new home and their family's culture. The commonality of such stories does nothing to diminish their authenticity, but it poses a challenge for creative writers.

Judy Fong Bates, who came to Canada from China as a young girl, catches and holds our attention like a teacher of unruly kids: She whispers. Her debut novel, *Midnight at the Dragon Café*, follows a collection of short stories in 1998 called *China Dog: And Other Tales from a Chinese Laundry*. Again, she concentrates on the lives of recent Chinese immigrants in a small town outside Toronto, but this time she focuses on a single desperately lonely family. The narrator is a Chinese immigrant named Su-Jen, who describes her early years in Canada with a voice that mingles a child's innocence with an adult's sadness. The story opens when she is only 6, coming to Toronto with her mother to meet her father for the first time. They live above a greasy spoon in Irvine, a classic small town with a main street, a single school and a monochromatic culture that expects Su-Jen and her family to kowtow to Charlie Chan stereotypes. For her parents, who lost everything to the communists, the opportunity to run their own restaurant and send their daughter to a beautiful school in a free country couldn't be more fortunate. "You're lucky to be here," they tell Su-Jen again and again until she begins to doubt it.

As they predicted, she learns English quickly, does well in school and even makes a few friends, but at home nothing feels lucky. Her father toils away at their humble restaurant, so concerned about saving money that everything – every pleasure, every diversion – is reduced to its

cold cash value. More troubling, though, is Su-Jen's mother, a deeply superstitious woman who regards their life in Canada as a grim exile. "This town is so quiet you can hear the dead," she says when they arrive, and her enthusiasm runs downhill from there. "My mother muttered over and over under her breath: this dead town, nobody around to talk to, nobody speaking Chinese and these ugly lo fon customers, work in life, work in death, and still no money." For Su-Jen, a shy, obedient girl, the burden is twofold: She must endure her mother's endless sighs and know that her parents have sacrificed their happiness to give her this lucky new life.

The arrival of her much older half-brother, a son from her father's first marriage who looks like a "Chinese Elvis," promises to shake things up, but instead he adds another voice to this chorus of muffled bitterness. Their father insists on a philosophy of *ngeng hay*, which means "to go along with things, to be uncomplaining." At its best it promotes congenial harmony, but "at its worst," Su-Jen writes, "this meant repressing all your bad thoughts, holding in the bad air, and allowing nothing to slip out."

Of course, despite how different and exotic Su-Jen considers her family, Bates has hit upon a central tenet of Western suburbia, which enforces its own version of *ngeng hay* to push expressions of complaint, unhappiness and spiritual malaise beneath its lush, freshly cut lawns. Outside her house, Su-Jen moves through the typical tribulations of childhood – a mean bully, a selfish friend, an impatient teacher – but at home she must negotiate an intolerable sexual conflict involving her father, mother and half-brother. The quiet voice Bates uses perfectly conveys the young girl's confusion as she struggles to love her family while growing increasingly outraged at their behavior and even more shocking passivity.

The sexual crime at the center of this story is almost Sophoclean, but Bates's unpretentious

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prose keeps the potential melodrama in check. By the end, when Su-Jen looks back at her parents and the small, painful world they created to give her a "lucky" childhood, she realizes how

truly costly their efforts were. Everyone's life, she reminds us, is a story of immigration, a bracing journey to new perspectives that make home "a distant place."

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