

Dirty laundry

Author Judy Fong Bates airs out the isolation and anguish felt by Canada's early Chinese immigrants in rural Ontario, writes Paul Gessel.

Canadians must be an uncurious lot.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, practically every small town in the country had one very exotic family in the community. But it was a family no one ever thought much about. It was a largely invisible family. It was the family that ran the ubiquitous Chinese restaurant, the so-called greasy spoon where bachelors devoured overcooked steaks and school kids wasted many an hour with the jukebox, Cokes, fries and gravy.

The smalltown Chinese restaurant should be as much a part of Canadian history as British Columbia's totem poles, Prairie grain elevators or Quebec's oversized churches. Yet, these restaurants – and the men, women and children who ran them – have largely disappeared into the fog of the past, as if they had never existed. Their world, however, has been vividly resurrected in the new novel, *Midnight at the Dragon Cafe*, by Toronto writer Judy Fong Bates. *Midnight*, while still an incomplete manuscript, was the subject of a vigorous bidding war a few years ago among five Canadian publishers when Bates's agent, Denise Bukowski, shopped the proposed book around. McClelland and Stewart won the war and will officially uncrate its prize next weekend at stores across the country.

The story that Bates has branded her "obsession" is to be published in the next year in the United States by Counterpoint, which has also been distributing Bates's only other book, a well-received collection of short stories first published in Canada in 1997 as *China Dog and Other Tales from a Chinese Laundry*.

The central character of *Midnight* is Su-Jen, a Chinese girl growing up in the fictional small Ontario town of Irvine in the early 1960s. Su-Jen's parents run a down-in-the-dumps restaurant, working long hours, seven days a week, and earning little money and less customer appreciation. They live in the town but are not really part of the town. Su-Jen's family does not embrace Canada and Canada does not embrace the family.

This, then, is largely a story of loneliness and isolation. Su-Jen's mother, an unforgettably tragic figure, is especially afflicted and, ultimately, allows her loneliness to destroy the family. Perhaps the most shocking aspect of the novel is the realization by the reader that similar heart-breaking stories involving real, lonely, isolated Chinese families must have been occurring in small towns across the country throughout the 1950s and 1960s. These were intense but private domestic tragedies happening all around us and, as we ordered our mid-afternoon coffee and apple pie a la mode, we never bothered to notice the anguish, and they, the ones who served us in their broken English, never bothered to complain.

Bates had a similar life to that of Su-Jen. She was born in China in 1949 and, at age five, came to Canada with her mother to join her father in his laundry business, initially in a small Ontario town that has since been swallowed up by Barrie and later in Acton, midway between Guelph and Brampton.

In a recent telephone interview, Bates said the isolation of her mother was even more intense than the wives of restaurant owners. The Chinese restaurants tended to be a beehive of activity smack in the middle of main street, with customers as eager for casual conversation as for food. The Fong family laundry was in a residential neighbourhood and was not exactly the centre of the town's social life. Customers did not tend to linger, or to gossip, over piles of dirty linen.

In the book, Su-Jen tries hard to fit in to her community. And she is shocked and saddened when her differences from her classmates are noted. That is certainly how she responds when a classmate brings two dolls to school one day and offers her one as a gift.

Suddenly, I felt uneasy. Debbie lifted the flannelette to show me her baby with its pink complexion and blue eyes. Then she reached over and carefully pulled down the

blanket that protected the face of mine. It was almost identical to hers: the open-and-shut eyes, the paintbrush eyelashes, the perfectly rounded cheeks, the cute, tiny upturned nose, and the rosebud mouth with a small hole for inserting a miniature baby bottle. The difference was that my doll had brown eyes and deep-brown skin that resembled my own. I held on to it for a moment, then turned and shoved the dark object back in Debbie's arms with such force that she almost lost her balance. 'I don't want it. Take it back,' I said.

Su-Jen's parents speak little English and participate in virtually no aspect of community life beyond their own business. Bates's parents were similar. The author can't remember her parents visiting her school for teacher-parent meetings or attending school concerts. Bates's parents were also like Su-Jen's in that they ate real Chinese food, not the fake Chinese cuisine or the hamburgers that were served in smalltown Chinese restaurants. Bates's father grew many of the family's own vegetables and would pickle much of his produce – a process that involved drying vegetables by hanging them on the family's backyard clothesline.

"The neighbours must have said: 'Who are these strange people hanging bok choy on their clothesline?'" Bates says with a chuckle.

Bates said she probably had fewer difficulties fitting in to Canadian life than the fictional Su-Jen did. This was, in large part, because Bates lived in a residential neighbourhood and did not have to spend her after-school hours in a downtown restaurant, doing her homework in the back booth and interrupting her studies to serve customers. After-school hours were her own because laundries tend to keep less onerous hours than restaurants and, besides, her parents would not let her touch "the dirty clothes of strangers."

"As a child, I felt very much part of the gang but I think there were always those moments that would highlight to me that I was different," Bates says. "I am like Su-Jen in that I have the sense of often being outside a window looking in."

Bates devoured the novels of Robertson Davies when she was a child. She loved those books because they were about the small Ontario towns she knew and lived in. Nevertheless, the novels were "exotic"

because the stories were about "the better side of the tracks" of those small Ontario towns and were certainly not about Chinese immigrants. Chinese laundries were on the other side of the tracks and even "lower on the pecking order" than Chinese restaurants.

So, why did so many Chinese families engage in a life of isolation and loneliness in small Canadian towns, working long hours for little financial return?

In *Midnight*, Su-Jen's father sees his business as a way to improve the long-term financial prospects of his children and to escape communism in China. But he is not really a savvy businessman. He resists sound advice from his son. His earnings are meagre and, in the end, his family is broken by its sad, isolated life in Ontario.

Bates says she expects that many Chinese men moved to small towns because they were not really risk-taking entrepreneurs; they felt safe opening businesses in these small towns where there was no competition. But there was a huge price to pay. The cultural and linguistic differences between the Chinese restaurateurs and their customers were vast. The two solitudes never really came to know one another.

The second generation of these Chinese-Canadian families is different. Su-Jen, you can tell, will be as Canadian as they come, just like Bates has become with her perfect English and long, successful career as a teacher and now a writer.

Bates sees herself as a dying breed. She, her family and most Chinese immigrants before the 1960s speak a Chinese dialect from Guangdong province known as the Four Counties Dialect. The language, with its unique colloquialisms, is disappearing in Canada. More recent Chinese immigrants tend to speak Mandarin or Cantonese and many of these new arrivals come to park their fortune rather than to seek their fortune.

But it is not just Bates's ancestral language that is disappearing. So is the history of her family and other Chinese pioneers. Bates is determined – obsessed, she says – to keep that part of Canadian history, as bleak as it is at times, from vanishing.

"I feel I have a story to tell that has been not widely told."