

Judy Fong Bates: Profile

The pleasure we Vancouverites take in Chinese New Year - our eagerness to watch a dragon dance, our appreciation of red envelopes of lucky money and festive Asian foods - is a far cry from the world Judy Fong Bates depicts in her new novel, *Midnight at the Dragon Cafe* (McClelland & Stewart, 315 pages). It tells of a time when Chinese immigrants were thin on the ground in Canada, when they ran the one restaurant in town that served gluey sweet-and-sour dishes and when, apart from being valued as the purveyors of paper fans and fortune cookies, they were pretty much left to their own devices. "It was a collection of very lonely people," Bates, a Torontonion who is in Vancouver this weekend, said of both her own family of origin and the Chou family in her novel. *Midnight* tells the story of Chou Hing-Wun, the man who runs the Dragon Cafe in Irvine, a fictional Ontario town. It's 1957, and as he's getting established he sends for his beautiful wife, Lai-Jing, and their five-year-old daughter, Su-Jen. The two arrive, speaking not a word of English but marvelling at the cold. "The street was coated with white," recalls Su-Jen, who narrates the story. Because she must go to school and learn English, Su-Jen comes to be known as Annie Chou. A gulf forms and widens between her and her parents, who labour at the restaurant, dutifully exchanging pleasantries with the town's bachelor tannery workers but never really learning English and never blending in. Bates, whose family ran a laundry in Acton, Ont., remembers being the only Asian child in town for a couple of years. Kids called out racist rhymes, like "chinky chinky Chinaman," and to the prevailing attitude of condescension her parents turned a bland, meek face. "When I was growing up," said the 54-year-old former elementary-school teacher, who began fictionalizing her life experience by mounting a one-woman show called *Tales from a Chinese Laundry*, Chinese immigrants "went out of their way to keep as low a profile as possible." Bates believes - as Paul Gessell wrote in the *Ottawa Citizen* after interviewing her - that the small-town Chinese greasy spoon is as much a part of Canadian history as the Prairie grain elevator and the B.C. totem pole. She wants to remind Canadians of earlier waves of Chinese immigration and of how isolated the members of her parents' generation were in their restaurants and laundries and penny-candy stores. Parents

and their children grew apart as the kids became acculturated. Some of her Caucasian women friends "talk about going and having lunch with their mothers and discussing the latest play they saw. That's never happened to me," she pointed out. "We never had those shared reference points." Immigrant parents react by exerting control over their children. "Your blood ties are even more intense. There is that sense of your blood being really thick. You sense that between Annie and her mother - the blood is really thick."

A number of the situations and characters in *Midnight at the Dragon Cafe* mirror things from Bates' past. She lived above her dad's laundry, the way Annie lives above the restaurant. Her parents, like Annie's parents, spoke of *hek fuh*, the need to "swallow bitterness" - or suck it up and keep going, as we'd say today. Her parents knew a Chinese man with bad skin who was affectionately called the Chinese equivalent of "Tofu Face"; in the novel, that person becomes Pock Mark Lee, a travelling vendor of Asian foodstuffs. But there is also a great deal of invention here, most notably the "water curse" that Annie's superstitious mother says hangs over her, making all contact with water dangerous, and the sexual affair that the girl sees taking place within her family, ripping it apart. Writing in the first person from young Annie's limited point of view ("I somehow feel that it's much more poignant," said Bates, who originally tried using an omniscient narrator), she builds the story scene by tiny scene. "I felt very much that this was a child who was beginning to discover things that she would not understand until she was much older. That often happens with children - they see things and tuck them away, and then it's years later that the penny drops." Bates, who had earlier published a story collection called *China Dog*, took a partial manuscript of *Midnight* - about 150 pages - to the Toronto literary agent Denise Bukowski. After agreeing to represent her, Bukowski shopped it around and, at the end of a spirited publishers' bidding war, sold it to M & S at the beginning of 2001. "I was really quite surprised," said Bates. "Very, very naïvely, I thought I would be finished the book in a couple of years. It just took so much more work than I ever anticipated." She felt hemmed in, having a child for a narrator. But unlike many writers, she doesn't err by putting overly grown-up thoughts

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in Annie's head. She never once strikes that kind of wrong note. She has been compared with Alice Munro because of her controlled prose and the currents of feeling that seethe beneath the surface of her fictional Ontario town.

Judy Fong Bates (née Fong Mun Sin) had a childhood that seems singular enough to belong in a museum - and part of it actually is in one. Her dad followed a rigid schedule at his laundry ("washdays were Mondays and Thursdays, ironing days were Tuesdays and Fridays, sorting days were Wednesdays and Saturdays") and churned the sudsy clothes with motorized action,

inside a large wooden tub. "Those machines were probably around as early as the '20s," said Bates, "and he was still using it up until the late '60s. He never really modernized." The Canadian Museum of Civilization, in Gatineau, Que., has a walk-through exhibit, titled Chinese Hand Laundry, that preserves the memory of an institution that was widespread in Canada between 1900 and 1950. What Bates has done, though, goes beyond replication. She has transmuted her experience into fiction that says something essential and makes wonderful reading. Great for Chinese New Year, great any time.