



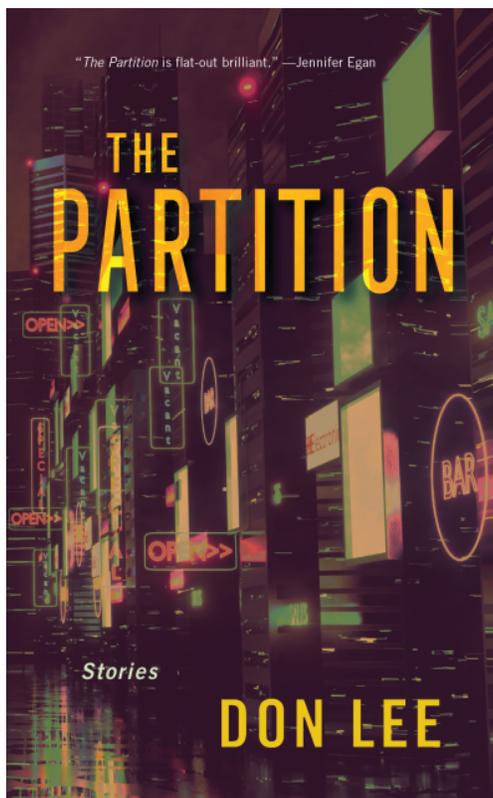
BALTIMORE WRITERS CLUB

The Dirty Secret of Rodgers Forge, and Other Inspirations: Don Lee Talks About His New Story Collection



by Nate Brown

April 27, 2022



Twenty-one years ago, when Don Lee published his debut collection of short stories, *Yellow*, it was met with deserved critical acclaim. Each story in the book is set in the fictional town of Rosarita Bay, California, and like Joyce's *The Dubliners*, the book presented an intimate, kaleidoscopic view of a place and its population.

Now regarded as a seminal collection, *Yellow*'s initial praise was tempered by a sentiment that, at the time, may have been meant as a compliment. In an otherwise glowing starred review in *Publisher's Weekly*, the reviewer notes that *Yellow* "shouldn't be relegated to Asian Studies shelves. The fact that Norton is the publisher, coupled with word-of-mouth interest and

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literary set, may boost crossover appeal.”

The idea that a book that centers non-white characters would not or could not achieve a wide readership is perhaps a reflection of the times in which the review was written, but it also reproduces a racist attitude long present in American publishing: that publishers are reluctant to acquire books by non-white writers (especially those about non-white characters) because they don't believe they'll sell well. Thankfully these attitudes are starting to change, if slowly.

What has not changed in the two decades since *Yellow's* publication is Don Lee's ability to present emotionally rich, intellectually engaging, and damned entertaining stories. In his new collection, *The Partition*, Lee presents readers with characters who persist in their romantic, professional, familial, and creative endeavors in spite of what the universe throws at them.

The Partition once again finds Lee investigating the nature of Korean and Korean American identity, not to make pronouncements but to depict life in our complicated and often cruel world. That his characters endure and occasionally even thrive suggests something that's hard not to feel upon finishing the book: that even in tough times, life is worth living, and that great stories are well worth reading.



BWC: *The Partition* is a more traditional collection of stories than your first linked collection. This time around, we see a variety of settings, characters, themes, nar

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stylistic choices, and points of view across nine stand-alone stories (though the final three share a protagonist). How did the experience of writing, editing, and ordering the stories in *The Partition* compare to what you experienced when writing *Yellow*?

Don Lee: In many ways, not having to think about how to link the stories together was freeing. Tying stories around a single place or circle of characters can feel artificial and forced. I'd written three stories between novels, then wrote six new stories to form *The Partition*. Unlike *Yellow*, I don't have recurring characters, but I tried to have a consistent voice and sensibility, so the reader would feel that there's a single, distinctive author talking to them. And each city that's used as a setting appears in at least two stories, so there are adumbrations and echoes with locales, as well other motifs, such as references to food, bars, and hotels.

BWC: In these stories, questions of identity are often messy. I think of Ingrid in the title story, Jay in "Confidants," and Peter in "Late in the Day." Each has various notions of Korean and diasporic Korean identity imposed on them by others, and each spends time attempting to reconcile those notions with their own experience and understanding of their identity. It's during that complex process of reconciliation when the sparks really fly, creating narrative tension and incredible momentum in each of these pieces.

Did you begin with some question related to identity that you wanted to examine in your stories, or did you start somewhere else (with character, for instance)?

DL: I didn't begin with a question about identity, because I made it a given that each of the main characters in this book would be Korean American and would deal with that split identity as a matter of course. Otherwise, it varied. "Confidants" started when I learned that there were still covenants on the books that limited residents of Rodgers Forge to whites only. "Late in the Day" was based on being invited to the Asian American film festival in Chicago years ago, meeting the biracial indie director Eric Byler, and learning about the intra-Asian squabbles about his film *Charlotte Sometimes*.

BWC: In the title story, Ingrid is on the cusp of receiving tenure at her university when a controversy over the fidelity of her translation of a South Korean novel threatens to upend her career. The circumstances reminded me of Deborah Smith's translation of Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* and the resulting fallout, which included claims of major translational liberties, at best, and malfeasance at worst. Was that the inspiration for the story?

DL: Most definitely. I was really intrigued by that controversy, and felt sorry for Deborah

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pounding she received, even though it was true that she'd never translated from the Korean before and had learned Korean only six years earlier. But the whole question of fidelity in translation is fascinating to me. In defending herself, Smith said a translation can never be literal or it'd be gibberish, which I think is correct. She also said that translation is necessarily a creative act, which I think is a little suspect. Yet the important thing is to abide by the spirit of the original work, which apparently she did, because the author, Han Kang, had no objections to the translation, especially after the novel won the Man Booker International Prize.

BWC: I've read only a couple of stories set during the pandemic that I've really admired, and "Commis" is among the best I've seen. Can you tell me a little about the experience of capturing our fraught contemporary moment on the page?

DL: I didn't want to address the pandemic, to be honest. I wrote most of the stories in 2018 and 2019, and their topical references would end there. But after I had the initial draft of the manuscript, knowing that the book wouldn't come out until 2022, I knew I had to address Covid. How could I not, after all the anti-Asian hate that was happening in the country? So I decided to add an up-to-minute story, "Commis." I still didn't want to write about the pandemic directly, so I did it indirectly, setting the story during that time period and acknowledging its effects, yet having family life and restaurants as its real subjects.

BWC: I often see really great ideas on the page, but it takes something else to make a great story. In "Commis," you're right: The pandemic is present, but the heart of the story is the closing of the family restaurant and the precarity of Penelope's nascent but promising career in fine dining. How do you know when a good idea is something more?

DL: John Gardner said there are only two types of stories: someone goes on a journey, or a stranger comes to town. "Commis" is a third type: someone has gone on a journey but then comes *back* to town. Once I figured out that Penelope works in fine dining in Philadelphia but temporarily has to go back home to Missouri, the story clicked. It suddenly had some texture, some added layers. But the impetus for this story really goes way back to 2010, when I was invited to give a reading at the University of Central Missouri in Warrensburg, Missouri. For dinner, my hosts took me to a restaurant called Oriental Cuisine—an almost farcically terrible name. I think the owners were of Korean descent, but the menu was a mishmash of Korean, Japanese, Chinese, and Thai food. It was not great. I wondered why my hosts had taken me there. Because I'm Asian? Because they thought that's the only type of food I'd like? I had really, actually, been looking forward to eating some barbecue in Missouri. Anyway, I tucked away that nugget about the restaurant Oriental Cuisine for ten years, knowing all along I'd someday write about it.

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BWC: The first piece in the book follows Peter, a director experiencing the highs and lows of making his first feature film and, later, a short documentary. The final three stories all feature the same protagonist-narrator, Alain, a Hollywood actor. What is it about the film industry that captures your imagination?

DL: I went to UCLA and then spent two more years in LA after I graduated, so I was surrounded by the entertainment industry. You couldn't get away from the entertainment industry there. Everyone wanted to work in the industry, which could get very annoying. And although I've always loved films, I've always been rankled by the representations of Asian Americans in them. It's a matter of authenticity. I never saw characters in films who happened to be Asian American. They were always Asian, period, and embodied all sorts of stereotypes—dry cleaners, geishas, comfort women, grocers, ninjas, Chinese waiters, gang members, Japanese salarymen, computer geeks. Thankfully that's changing.

BWC: Are there recent films that you think do a good job of representing Asian characters?

Recently I've liked *The Farewell*, *Minari*, and *Columbus*, although I've always been partial to another John Cho film, *Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle*, which was ahead of its time and truly groundbreaking, when you think about it—a stoner buddy movie with Asian American characters who are regular dudes, who don't speak with an accent.

BWC: In addition to being a writer and a professor, you were also the longtime editor of *Ploughshares*, one of the most respected literary magazines in the country. How did reading, selecting, and editing stories for the magazine differ from writing and editing your own stories?

DL: It was difficult for me to write when I was an editor, because I think the two occupations use the same psychic space. But I did learn a few things. Namely, I learned that stories could be technically polished, but it wasn't enough. There needed to be something unique and organic about them to really interest me as an editor. But otherwise, it was remarkable to me that, despite being an editor, I remained so *dumb* as a writer submitting my work to magazines. For instance, I was insane enough to write a 52-page story and then send it to journals, thinking the length wouldn't be a problem.

BWC: In between your two collections, you wrote four novels. How do you know what stories are best suited for the short form and what ideas are best reserved for a novel?

DL: I think I know right away when I start something if it's going to be a story or a novel.

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the way the narrative is unspooling, whether it's leisurely or compressed, and sensing if there's potential for a series of incidents. When I was shopping around *The Partition*, some editors wondered if the title story could be a novel. I emphatically said no. But I did want to write a concluding novella like I did with the title story to *Yellow*. Here, I chose to do a three-story cycle with Alain, covering 45 years of his life.

BWC: You mentioned earlier that you return to some of the same settings in this collection. While the stories in *Yellow* are primarily set in a fictionalized town in California, the stories in *The Partition* take readers to Los Angeles, Chicago, Boston, Missouri, Texas, Hawaii, Tokyo, Philadelphia, Baltimore and elsewhere, and in each case, you present vivid details and identifiable place names. When and how do you settle on a setting for a story?

DL: I think setting is central and crucial to all fiction. It becomes a character in and of itself. The places in the stories are all cities in which I've lived or spent significant time. My dad was in the military and then the State Department, and we bounced around a lot when I was a kid, posted multiple times to Tokyo and Seoul. I was born in Tokyo, and I attended DOD and private international schools from K-12. So I was a military and diplomatic brat. I think such transience has a big effect. You have even less of a grounding for your identity, which might, as in my case, already be compromised by race and ethnicity. Thus, I decided on *The Partition* as the title for the book—being in a liminal space, between countries, cultures, languages, and selves.

Come to the Ivy Bookshop's patio at 6 p.m. on April 29, 2022, to hear Don in conversation with fiction writer Leigh Newman, who discussed her latest collection with Elisabeth Dahl for Baltimore Writers Club last week.

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ATW INTERVIEWS

DON LEE

August 02, 2022

How did you become a writer?

It was a total fluke. At UCLA, my initial plan was to get a bachelor's in mechanical engineering and then a PhD in physical oceanography so I could design, build, and pilot submersibles. I watched a lot of Jacques Cousteau as a kid. But I was bored silly with the science and math courses and took a creative writing class as an elective. I loved it mostly because I loved my classmates—a bunch of renegades and bohemians, so much more interesting than engineering students. That class led to more workshops and an eventual switch in majors to English.

Name your writing influences (writers, books, teachers, etc.).

I like to answer this by citing some favorite books: *Stoner* by John Williams, *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro, *Wind-up Bird Chronicle* by Haruki Murakami, *So Long, See You Tomorrow* by William Maxwell, and *Selected Stories* by Alice Munro. But probably one of the most important mentors I had was Richard Yates. I met him in a restaurant/bar in Boston when I was 24 and saw him fairly often for a couple of years. He only read one story of mine, which he didn't particularly like, but he served as a model for the type of dedication that a writer needs.

When and where do you write?



ABOUT ATW

Writerly wisdom of the ages collected by the author of *Advice To Writers*, *The Big Book of Irony*, and *The Portable Curmudgeon*.

BOOKS BY JON
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Since I teach full-time, I mostly binge-write during the summer. Every day, all day.

What are you working on now?

I usually take a break after a book comes out, so that's what I'm doing now, not working on anything. But I'm letting an idea for a short neo-noir novel gestate in my head.

Have you ever suffered from writer's block?

Not writer's block, per se, but I have suffered from false starts. In fact, with my last two novels, *The Collective* and *Lonesome Lies Before Us*, I wasted a year on each, working on an entirely different storyline before abandoning it and starting what would be the eventual novel. Those weren't fun experiences, but I wonder now if that's become my method for writing novels. Yikes.

What's the best writing advice you've ever received?

I don't know where I picked this up, but the best tip I've ever gotten is to use a kitchen timer (or phone or whatever) when you're slogging. Set it for 20 minutes, and make a deal with yourself. Once you start the timer, you cannot go on the internet, look at your phone, check Twitter or Instagram or Facebook, etc. You can't even get up to go to the bathroom. You can only do one of two things: write, or just sit there. You get so bored, you end up writing. When the timer goes off, take a break, then start the timer again.

What's your advice to new writers?

Don't take yourself so seriously. I didn't really improve as a writer until I finally did just that and stopped being so goddamn pretentious.

Don Lee's latest book, the story collection *The Partition*, has just been published by Akashic Books. He is also the author of the collection *Yellow* and the novels *Country of Origin*, *Wrack and Ruin*, *The Collective*, and *Lonesome Lies Before Us*. He has received an American Book Award, the Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature, and the Sue Kaufman Prize for First Fiction. He lives near Baltimore with his wife, the writer Jane Delury, and directs the MFA program in creative writing at Temple University in Philadelphia. don-lee.com

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