



ROBERT GAUTHIER / Los A

"I felt that I couldn't be happy if I wasn't great. . . . Then 40 loomed larger for me. . . . and that instilled a need that overcame my inhibition," says

Don Lee's Revealing Visit to Rosarita Bay

The author and editor explores the complex essence of Asian American life in story form.

By **TIM RUTTEN**
TIMES CULTURE CORRESPONDENT

Because we are the people of an idea and not of blood or soil, American nationality often is a deeply felt ambiguity. Because we are a nation of immigrants, ethnicity and individual identity co-mingle here in uniquely American ways.

The hyphen we choose to embed in our self-description—Irish American, Mexican American, African American—does not simply designate a familial origin. For many of us, it is the pivot on which we balance delicate questions of acceptance and rejection, pain and pride, assimilation and self-assertion.

The literary calibration of this process by

now constitutes a virtual genre of American letters. But few writers have mined the form's possibilities as shrewdly or transcended its limits quite so stunningly as Don Lee, a third-generation Korean American, whose elegant and engrossing collection of short fiction, "Yellow," recently was published by Norton.

An interwoven cycle of six stories and a novella—all of whose protagonists are Asian American—Lee's 255-page book is a triumph of the artful over the didactic. His characters' ethnic backgrounds are so varied (Korean American, Chinese American, Japanese American and Filipino American) and their vocations so diverse (artist, entrepreneur-turned-surfer, poet, lawyer, fisherman, student, teacher and engineer) that they constitute a

rich and unusually complete portrait of contemporary Asian America.

Ethnicity is part of the background noise of their American lives, but so too are love, work, desire, sex, anxiety, success, failure, loneliness and perplexity—often more influentially. Lee calls this fertile territory "post-immigration Asian identity," and his exploration of its intricacies is admired by, among others, the Chinese American writer, Gish Jen.

Lee, she said, "eschews the politically correct, not so much for the politically incorrect, as for a third ground of real human complexity."

Lee has situated that ground in the fictive Rosarita Bay, a slightly seedy, slightly bohemian Northern California coastal town loosely modeled on Half Moon Bay. "I was interested in creating a California every-town, and I wanted it to be one of those small California places where Asians have been a part of the community for generations, pursuing normal American lives in normal American ways," Lee explained in a conversation following a recent reading at Barnes & Noble in Westwood.

Ann Beattie, one of the American short story's contemporary masters, calls Lee's collection "a masterpiece" and attributes its success, in part, to the author's successful realization of Rosarita Bay and its inhabitants. "It was no different than reading 'Dubliners,' and figuring, 'Yep, that's how the Irish really must be,'" she said. "You simply take its authenticity as a given, because he writes so well and with such authority."

The Westwood reading was something of a homecoming for the 41-year-old Lee, who graduated from UCLA in 1982 after a boyhood

Please see Lee, E4

Lee: Author Captures Essence of Asian American Life in Story Form

Continued from E1

spent mostly in Tokyo and Seoul, where his father, a career foreign service officer, was posted.

Lee chuckled when he recalls how closely his initial aspirations conformed to those of the stereotypically ambitious son of upper-middle-class Asian American parents. "I was an engineering major for my first two years at UCLA," he said. "My projected path was all worked out: an undergraduate degree, a couple of years working for Lockheed, earn an MBA and then a career as a project manager.

"What happened to me was that I was taking English and creative-writing courses on the side, and I

found that they filled the increasing need I felt for a verbal outlet. So, I frightened my parents by switching to an English major in my junior year but made them feel a little better by telling them I would go to law school."

Two years after graduating from UCLA, however, Lee moved to Boston to pursue an MFA at Emerson College. He stayed on to edit one of the country's leading literary magazines, *Ploughshares*, a labor of love he has pursued for the last 12 years.

"I went to Emerson on a whim," said Lee, who is a relaxed, self-deprecating conversationalist. "I really didn't know much about it,

but I knew that I wanted to get to the East Coast, but didn't want to live in New York. Every year since, I've told myself: 'I'm going to go back to California,' and that is still my dream. I think I've stayed because of *Ploughshares*, which I love."

Striving for Perfection in Writing

Given the unforced quality of the touch he displays in "Yellow," it comes as a bit of a surprise, when Lee describes the collection's long gestation. "Some of these stories go back over 13 years," he said. "I resisted the idea of a book because, for me, there was always a lot of fear of failure. I'm a real perfectionist about my writing.

"I saw early on that I couldn't be what I regard as a great writer, and for a long time, I felt that I couldn't be happy if I wasn't great. The worst thing in the world to be is an embittered writer, so I really was quite happy publishing a single story every year and a half or so. Then 40 loomed larger for me than I ever could have imagined, and that instilled a need that overcame my inhibition."

So, too, did a thematic preoccupation that grew, in part, from Lee's unexpected encounters with racial and, particularly, anti-Asian prejudice in Boston.

"I found myself interested in two contradictory agendas," he said. "One was post-immigration Asian identity where being Asian is not in the forefront of the person's mind. I don't go around every minute thinking I am Asian, and neither do these characters. I

wanted them to be just as sexy, artsy and screwed up as everyone else in America is. But I also wanted to educate people about the kind of prejudice Asian Americans face every day.

"The necessity of doing that was brought home to me when one of my close friends in Boston—who happens to be white—said: 'I never thought of Asians as being discriminated against.' When I heard that, I knew I wanted to present the kinds of prejudice Asian Americans continue to face and feel in parts of this country.

"Now, admittedly, most of it comes in the form of pretty benevolent stereotypes: All Asians are smart and hard-working. All Asian men are geeky with calculators on their belts. All Asian women are passive, either submissive chrysanthemums or seductive geishas. These aren't hugely destructive stereotypes, but they are stereotypes, nonetheless—and they can have hurtful consequences."

In "Yellow," the novella that gives the collection its title, Lee comes to grips with these issues in what he admits is the most frankly autobiographical of his stories. The protagonist, Danny Kim, who, like Lee, is handsome and passionately athletic, traverses an arc from his native Rosarita Bay through UCLA, on to professional success in Boston and back to a kind of peace and mature accommodation with his family and birthplace.

The story is, Lee said, "a kind of odyssey through the conventional prejudices that an Asian American of my generation might have encountered. It's so long because I broke my foot while running, and every day after I had dragged my-

self back up to my fourth floor walk-up, I found myself with the time to indulge in the kind of direct, soapbox writing I'd never permitted myself before. Even at the risk of appearing melodramatic or even didactic, I wanted to show how I had come full circle myself.

"After life as the son of a diplomat, I went to UCLA and then lived in Los Angeles for several years afterward. To tell the truth, I didn't know I was Asian until I went to Boston and, because of my race, encountered verbal attacks I'd never encountered before. All of the epithets in that story are real; they are epithets actually thrown at me."

None of Lee's characters, however, are conventional victims of bigotry—or anything else:

In "Voir Dire," a Korean American public defender, deeply conflicted over his defense of a Chinese immigrant drug dealer accused of killing his addict girlfriend's child, privately disparages his own ex-wife, a conservative Korean American civil lawyer, as a "kuppie," or Korean yuppie. She is equally contemptuous of the public defender's conventionally liberal politics and derides him as "a pagoda of virtue."

In "The Price of Eggs in China" a gifted Japanese American furniture-maker finds himself caught between two warring Korean American women artists—"Oriental Hair Poet No. 1 and No. 2"—and the story of how he extricates himself becomes an extended meditation on artistic success and failure.

The brotherly protagonists of "Casual Water" find themselves deserted in turn by their Filipina mother and their Caucasian father, a feckless golf pro, but discover

their affection for each other in the unexpected solidarity extended by other inhabitants of Rosarita Bay.

Identifying With His Characters

The book is peopled by so many memorable and utterly authentic Asian American characters that one of the revisions Lee says he undertook is particularly surprising.

"A couple of these stories," he said, "actually had white characters as their protagonists when they were originally published in magazines. I'm really not sure why that was, other than I think that perhaps I simply was trying to demonstrate my empathy as a writer. In any event, when I revised them and made the characters Asian, they not only opened up for me, but I also understood more of why they had behaved as they did in the stories."

In fact, Lee's preoccupation with the exigencies of storytelling is one of "Yellow's" great pleasures. An admirer of F. Scott Fitzgerald and the heroic era of short American fiction, Lee is unafraid of flirting with the perils of melodrama and even sentimentality—if it is the service of narrative. His prose is spare and free of literary allusions, and he is unafraid to take narrative chances, including what some might consider Hollywood action set pieces. Danny Kim, for example, dives into a river to rescue a colleague suicidal over his failure to win a promotion.

"As I get older, I am more interested in plot," he said. "One of the things I've learned over the years is not to have a story static in time or place. I am walking a dangerous line, but I think it is worth the risk."

So, too, does Beattie. "Speaking personally, as a reader, one of the things I appreciate about it is that they are very energetic stories, and yet they make me feel strangely hopeful. Very serious things go on in these stories. But, throughout, there is this feeling that good writers can give you: Their characters may be in very bad state when their stories er I, but you've been subjected to an energized world that makes you believe in their significance.

"The other good thing about this book—speaking as somebody who has read too much—is that the dialogue is something to be admired in its own right. His characters speak so directly and with such authority that it is all utterly believable."

It is appraisal that might comfort Lee, who has anxiously embarked on his first novel, the story of "an interracial love triangle involving American diplomats in Tokyo. One of my favorite books is 'The Great Gatsby,'" he said. "But instead of fame and money, this is about race and patriotism. A couple of months ago, I realized I had characters but no plot, and I went into second-book panic.

"I was certain everyone would realize that I'm an impostor and a fraud who never will write again. Then I thought about the story and came up with a missing person. She will be a Korean American woman, and right now I'm doing a lot of research because I get to know my characters by getting to know their jobs."

Meanwhile, he continues to muse over the reception "Yellow" has received. "I always have the sense with serious literary fiction that you are preaching to the converted," he said. "The conversation I had with that friend in Boston led me to give this book a didactic point. But I hope that point is not the entire book."

FICTION

BOSTON SUNDAY GLOBE

Otherness and its aspects in white America

Yellow

By Don Lee

Norton, 255 pp., \$22.95

By Judy Budz

The Asian-American characters may feel "yellow" in Don Lee's wonderful collection of short stories, but any "unsettling otherness" is much less striking than their essential familiarity. The eight completely realized stories in "Yellow" are set in the fictional town of Rosarita Bay, "pumpkin capital of the world," located 50 miles south of San Francisco on Highway 1, where the traffic is sometimes so heavy that 15-mile rush-hour commutes last two hours. In Rosarita Bay, Korean-, Japanese-, and Chinese-Americans contemplate marriage, surf the pipeline, eat in French bistros, and box at the YMCA. Lee's poised, restrained storytelling recalls martial artists battling in the treetops. His passionately confused characters, mostly men, balance precariously before a phalanx of daredevil, gravity-defying women.

The stories are linked by theme and location, as well as by characters who move in and out of focus. Two are about a second-generation Korean-American family, the Kims. In "Domo Arigato" ("thank you" in Japanese), Eugene, a medical student, is about to be dumped by his Caucasian girlfriend but is too dense to see the signs. The girl's tipsy mother, wife of an American CIA agent, delivers the news when Eugene visits at their posting in Japan. In the title story, being "yellow" is both a ra-



PHOTO/MICHELLE McDONALD

DON LEE

cial and character slur since Eugene's older brother, Donny, throws a boxing match out of fear.

Being afraid comes up again in "Casual Water," the story of two young brothers deserted by their parents. Mom is long gone, and before Dad sneaks off for a last try on the Asian golf tour, he enjoys driving golf balls directly at his 17-year-old son, Patrick, who must either catch them in his baseball mitt or duck like a "wuss." Patrick, headed to Annapolis in the fall, does not know who will take responsibility for his 11-year-old brother, Brian. On the last day of school, Brian violently slams his forehead into his desk, forcibly bringing the situation to its crisis.

Yet these are not sad stories. In "The Possible Husband," 41-year-old Duncan Ruh, millionaire venture capitalist, fondly remembers

his 100 former lovers, "a rather modest average of four a year." Most of them have been "Asian amazons." Duncan's true love is surfing, and he has figured out that there are 30 winter days a year when "groundswells generated by Aleutian storms . . . pulse unimpeded over open ocean" directly against a submerged reef in Rummy Creek. After rolling for 2,000 miles, the swells create surf large enough to swamp buses. What woman could rival such a thrill? No wonder Duncan sets his beeper to alert him when the waves top 20 feet in the creek.

Most of the stories, in one way or another, are about relationships. In almost all of them, the women are so powerful that the men barely have a chance. Public defender Hank Low Kwon, representing a child-murdering cocaine addict, is criticized by both his ex-wife and his pregnant girlfriend for pursuing a defense of "negative culpability for anyone on drugs." The story's title, "Voir Dire," reminds the reader that seeking the truth is not simple. In "Widowers," fisherman Alan Fujitani, his wife dead for 22 years, has an affair with 23-year-old Emily. Her merchant marine husband drowned when he dismounted from a handstand on the wrong side of a ship's railing.

Handstands, surfing, boxing, golf-ball shagging: Lee's characters all must learn balance, the skill of maintaining position. Lee's graphic pictures of this balance are often stunning. Hank's pregnant girlfriend springs from the trampoline at the foot of her bed,

"her body toppling, breaking the plane of inertia, then falling toward him, gathering speed as she brought her hands together, arms rigid, palms flat. An inch before his face she split her hands apart, and he felt a rush of air as they brushed past his ear." The reader flinches, but not Hank. He knows that Molly will convince him to have the baby; that "eventually she would crush him" with her will if not her body.

Several times, Lee surprises us by revealing what happens to his characters almost before we meet them. He is interested in character, not plot; irony, not mystery. By paragraph five, we know for sure Eugene's girlfriend will disappoint him, a recognition underscored when an impromptu karaoke session breaks out in a Tokyo bar. One local patron mouths the lyrics to "Will You Love Me Tomorrow?" Similarly, in "The Price of Eggs in China," master chairmaker Dean Kaneshiro is completely controlled by his girlfriend, Oriental Hair Poet #1, Caroline Yip. Caroline is enraged when her old rival, Oriental Hair Poet #2, shows up in Rosarita Bay. Worse, #2 has ordered a chair. Dean may be the winner of a genius grant and an exhibitor at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts, but he is completely controlled by Caroline. The question is not if she will win him, but how.

This is a collection for readers often left unsatisfied by the brevity of short stories. Besides the repeated characters, the sense of place is novelistic. Although its fishing and farming industries are

drying up, Rosarita Bay has a main street "lined with gas street lamps and old-time clapboard saltbox shops and restaurants," making it look like "genuine small-town America." However, shadowing this idealized if seedy charm are memories of internment camps, Korean villages, and Filipino naval stations.

Inside jokes abound as Lee's characters vehemently mock stereotype. Upwardly mobile Korean-Americans are "Kuppies"; a developer is an ABC, American-born Chinese. The women consider Asian men "pathetically easy to manipulate." The men see that "sex and manipulation are conjoined" in their Asian girlfriends. Identifying country of origin is tricky, since the Koreans look Japanese, and the Filipinos have blond hair.

Fans of the literature of otherness, of ethnic voices emphasizing cultural tension and generational change, will find these as well as other qualities to admire in Lee's collection. The craftsmanship in these stories is like that of the genius chairmaker, whose training included six months of learning to sharpen his tools. The creator of chairs perfectly suited to the anatomy of each owner, Dean no longer needs to use "levels, squares, and marking gauges"; he expects shortly "to dispense with rulers altogether." The stories in this collection are as finely crafted as those chairs.

Judy Budz is a professor of English at Fitchburg State College.

Both Sides of the Hyphen

Two very different story collections explore questions of Asian-American identity.

TALKING IN THE DARK

Stories.

By Laura Glen Louis.

210 pp. New York: Harcourt. \$23.

YELLOW

Stories.

By Don Lee.

255 pp. New York:

W. W. Norton & Company. \$22.95.

By Will Blythe

IF these two debut short-story collections, both by Asian-Americans, are any indication, it would be hard to say which is more deranging — love or America. Both realms can make you feel like a stranger, trapped in an identity imposed from outside, prone to asking that fundamental question: What the hell am I doing here? These books' dissimilar treatment of such issues suggests that what Ralph Ellison wryly noted about novels also holds true for these stories: they are always about minorities — the individual.

The individuals in Laura Glen Louis's "Talking in the Dark" may be Chinese-Americans new to the West Coast, but more than anything else they are characters for whom the experience of love demands the ultimate migration — from safety to omnipresent danger. Louis, who emigrated to the United States from Hong Kong at 5, specializes in love's terrors and indignities. In her stories, the daughter of an immigrant family is stalked by a young man from the old country; a couple lose a child to crib death; a divorced woman succumbs to an embarrassing seduction by her daughter's teenage boyfriend.

Her prose aims for a kind of poetic intensity. The best stories here keep the rhetoric fierce and astringent; the lesser ones feel as if too much has been said, yet not quite precisely enough. They occasionally suffer from a designer-Zen preciousness, where the writing seems intent on consecrating itself rather than the moment it represents, as in the following: "Here are the instruments of the tea; here is this wild flower. That is all. Or, that is everything."

At its weakest, this collection even heaves its bosom, sighs deeply and drops a perfumed handkerchief on the floor. "Shape me," a jewelry maker instructs her boyfriend, a carpenter, in "Divining the Waters." This guy had better be Antonio Banderas if he's going to get hit with a line like that. (He's not. And fortunately for the relationship, he doesn't actually hear her.)

Despite the occasional lapses into Harlequin Romance mode, "Talking in the Dark" has its share of superb and wise stories. In "Fur," a fat old Chinese widower in San Francisco who has made a fortune in Hong Kong real estate falls for a young bank teller on the make. She charms her

way into his life, only to steal his dead wife's fur coat and disappear. He eventually finds her in a fancy Chinese restaurant; she is the mistress of the owner. He worries about her choice of a sugar daddy. She bristles. "Did you marry for love?" she says. "What do you and I know about it? You've been in America too long." It's a delicate, translucent narrative that fills with light at the end.

Another fine story, almost Chekhovian in its rendering simplicity, is "Rudy's Two Wives," which is set in a coffee shop where a divorced couple meet to discuss the man's problems with his new wife. The old wife feels sympathy for him, even as he complains about the lack of sex since his second wife gave birth.

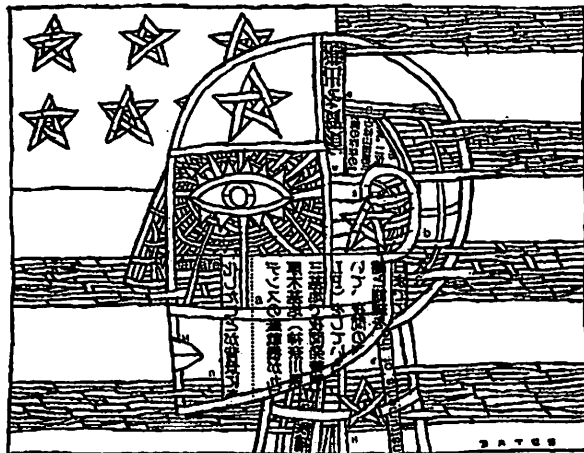
Don Lee's collection of stories, "Yellow," is a burlier affair, a frontal assault on matters of identity summed up rather baldly in the question that even fellow Asian-Americans ask one of the book's protagonists: "What are you?" Most of the charac-

ter to regard novel-reading as rebellious.) His diction becomes "strangely Anglicized" from his affection for the fiction of Conrad, Lawrence and Henry James, and he takes to correcting his parents' English. "He wanted to be exemplary, unquestionably American," Lee writes.

Along the way, however, Danny receives a few bad shocks. An opposing fighter taunts him for being "yellow." A blonde in a bar spurns him because he isn't white. His girlfriend's grandmother welcomes him to America, as if he were fresh off the boat. "No matter what he did, no matter how much he tried to deny it, he would never get past his ethnicity," Danny concludes, and "the knowledge broke him." He puts his head down and bulls through U.C.L.A. and Harvard Business School, eventually becoming a buttoned-up management consultant and marrying a Korean-American woman. But all the while his rage over his belief that he "was always regarded as a foreigner ... not a real American" has built to the point that he is becoming paranoid about nearly everyone around him.

Danny Kim is typical of Lee's men. Solid professionals, they are usually good-looking, smart and mannerly but also a little baffled. Their revolutions, if they come, are quiet and understated. His women are a rowdier bunch. More sure of themselves, they tend to meet force with force. They cut loose with lines like this, from Danny's sister Lily in the story "The Possible Husband": "Men are pigs," she tells her suitor, Duncan. "It's like you're missing some higher brain functions and you're operating purely on the stem. All I hear is oink." Then there's the brash Annie Yung, a software company employee from Silicon Valley who falls under the spell of country singers like Patsy Cline, taken by their "pure, deep-voiced insistence of truth which, at exactly the right moment, would crack and quaver and break your heart." Sounding like a bad imitation of Tammy Wynette, she tries to pick up a guy at a cowboy bar. Why are you talking "like some yahoo?" he asks.

Fortunately, just when you start to hear America singing (Korean gal makes it with Western guy), and things look as sentimental as a bad country song, Lee yanks the rug Annie would like to cut right out from under her. Throughout this fine collection he does the same to the expectations often generated in readers by so-called ethnic literature. In lesser hands, "Yellow" might have degenerated into a sociological document, or worse, a one-note polemic, leaving little room for the often transgressive swoops and dives of fiction. It's a tricky proposition to write about ethnicity and not crowd readers with right thinking. But Lee does it, and in the process proves that wondering about whether you're a real American is as American as a big old bowl of kimchi. □



GEORGE BATES

ters in these linked stories, which take place mostly in the fictional town of Rosarita Bay, Calif., are trying to figure that out. How long before they are simply Americans, no questions asked? What are they?

Sometimes, the connection between the stories can seem forced, and a few characters seemed spawned from a thesis rather than the other way around. But more often than not, Lee, who is the editor of the literary magazine Ploughshares and a third-generation Korean-American, proves himself a worthy practitioner of realistic fiction in the vein of writers like Richard Yates and Andre Dubus. His narratives zip along, encapsulating whole lifetimes of intelligent men and women whose self-awareness is insufficient for the gantlets they must run.

This is certainly the case with the powerful title story, an account of the ascent of Danny Kim from a West Coast family of Korean immigrants to corporate bigwig at a Boston consulting firm. Like many first-generation Americans (especially those in American literature), Danny rebels against his family's expectations. He boxes in a downtown gym, rejects such traditional Korean fare as kimchi and pindaettok and devours literary novels. (Leave it to a

Will Blythe is the literary editor of Men's Journal.

NEW YORK TIMES. July 15, 2001

ating
0 years
A
t tale
feuds
s from
lling
ondon.

ng...
brings
Forest

mes
ing as
herford's
novel of
ondon."
Globe

ng...
ome that
ith fiction
0 years
of New
000-acre
outhern
rk Post

Michener
an
ent."
Dispatch

love
deceit
nce,
d loss."
ury News

ERBACK
e Books
books.com

SHORT STORIES *By Elizabeth Roca*

Tales of internal exile, loneliness, unpleasant pairings and unlikely desires.

The excitement of reading Laura Glen Louis's debut story collection, *Talking in the Dark* (Harcourt, \$23), derives not only from its prose but also from the possibilities she sees in her characters. "Tea," the first story, makes Louis's vision clear: "The moon of [the woman's] fingernail is black. A wayward hammer? A car door? Suddenly the woman possessed a hammer, a car, perhaps even a home, an untold story." Everyone has "an untold story," according to Louis, and the characteristics hidden beneath the surface are often the most compelling.

"Fur" is the chosen name of a poor young woman trying to reinvent herself as a glamour girl, an act of bravado that includes a craving for a fur coat that can be acquired only by dishonest means. As the story unfolds, so does the woman's character: Her sweet appearance is belied by her ruthlessness, which is succeeded by a frightened child wishing to live an honest life.

In several stories this revelation of self is accompanied by unexpected turns of plot. "Thirty Yards" introduces us to a tennis-playing teenager named Christine. An older man is attracted to her, terrifying her as he becomes more and more obsessive. Christine is aware of the deeper layer uncovered in herself, and reacts with dismay: "Mostly she hated him for what he brought out in her—real fear, a hardness, more metal than [sic] she ever wanted to know she could possess." At that moment, Christine realizes she no longer can hide from her stalker, that her elusive inner self serves her better than she ever could have imagined, and in a way that readers may not anticipate. Louis guides her characters through their changes with a firm, compassionate hand.

Families in the Backwater

The physical territory of Don Lee's accomplished first story collection, *Yellow* (Norton, \$22.95), is the fictional town of Rosarita Bay, Calif., a "sleepy, slightly seedy backwater" halfway between San Francisco and Santa Clara. The collection's spiritual territory is the notion of family: how the bonds between people are formed, altered and broken. Lee alternates between humor and pathos in delineating his characters' endeavors to find people who will give their lives meaning, and then to hold them close.

In "The Lone Night Cantina" a newly single woman tries to find the man of her fantasies by dressing in Western style and hanging around a pseudo-cowboy bar, while "Widowers" is the story of a man so attached to his wife that, in the 22 years since her death, he has been unable to form ties to another woman. Both characters struggle to reconcile memory with current longings and loneliness. Also lonely is Patrick, protagonist of "Casual Water." A teenager left in charge of his younger brother after their desertion by their parents, Patrick is caught in a wrenching collision of love and ambition. His dream is to attend the Naval Academy, but if he leaves his brother will be put into foster care. With minimal outside help, Patrick must decide where his responsibilities lie, and if what is best for him will also be best for his brother.

Lee's most gripping depiction of emotional isolation and the fear and rage it can engender occurs in the collection's extraordinary title story. Danny is a Korean American for whom the word "yellow" is a taunt aimed at both his race and his natural timidity. In an effort to change his nature, he strives for physical and professional perfection, withdrawing from family, friends and hometown; only a near-tragedy jolts him into forgiveness and self-acceptance. Acknowledging the invisible ties that bind him to those around him finally makes Danny whole.

Desperately Seeking Experience

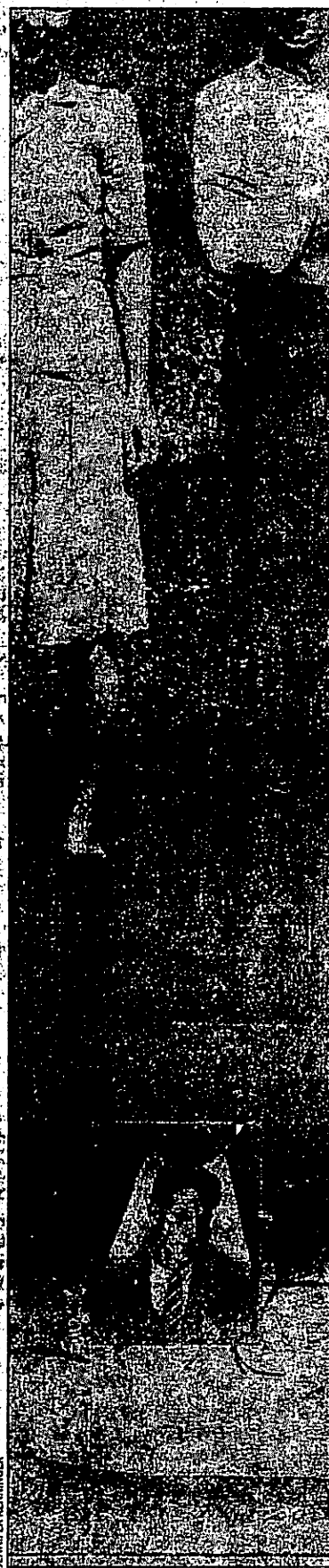
In Alicia Erian's debut story collection, *The Brutal Language of Love* (Villard, \$21.95), we meet a series of young women looking to those around them for clues to their own lives. "Lass" is a half-torrid, half-tender account of a sexually malleable American woman who travels to London, marries an Irishman and moves in with his parents, only to become embroiled in a mutual attraction with her father-in-law. In the end, the older man is the one to determine whether their relationship will become physical; while the girl is aware of the magnitude of the betrayal she is contemplating, she is unable to take decisive action.

The heroines of other stories are bent on equally self-destructive courses. "On the Occasion of My Ruination" is narrated by a college-bound teenager determined to lose her virginity before school opens; not unexpectedly, her eye is fixed on a most unworthy suitor. As the story's title suggests, the tale is told with a brightness and humor that will make some women grin in chagrined recognition, but it's hard not to wince in reaction to the painful denouement.

Not all of Erian's characters alter their lives in such devastating ways. "Almonds and Cherries" is the sweet story of a woman forced to question her sexuality after an encounter in a department store dressing room. Here, the woman's trust in her lover is not misplaced. Erian writes with wit and insight, except in "Standing Up to the Superpowers"; in this story, the protagonist's emotions are vaguely and flatly described, making her actions seem random and pointless. Despite their protagonists' follies, the stories nearly always end on a hopeful note. Erian is well aware of our romantic foibles, but she also believes in the basic goodness of human nature.

Danger Signals

The stories in Laura Furman's new collection, *Drinking With the Cook* (Winedale, \$24), tend toward the contemplative, a quality that works to the detriment of the title story and two others, "What Would Buddha Do?" and "The Natural Memory." In each, a woman is living through a time of conflict with her husband or lover. The men are singularly unpleasant, the women passive and silent. There's an argument about an overlarge Christmas tree, others over a prospective move and a hiking trip, but the bitterness evident between each couple is unaccountable; the related events and the corresponding emotions don't add up. There's no evidence of love—past or present—between these cou-



ples, and in the part or clear th

Furman's sto her characters "That Boy" is physical detail learns that a n grief and mak tion, half spite woman hung mentally ill fa with an artist youth; the res able.

"The Wood scribing the n tinge of mena her family in for every poss ultimately sur appears first t had ignored l she had decid had been thei just the right awareness an

Brief Lives

Kevin Can both beautif in the poetic language, pe which encor death. The b Canty's new Other Stor that mood is sent unwilling girl banished The boy, Flip inside him, t and snacks, empty place burning cor pregnant ste legs like an lowed." Flip the girl's pr and her resp fies a need w

The accor more compl a pair of w weekend tog an has adva factor into passes, the n justments o must make well as the et live well whi

The storie part because bad things h cope with married a y compromise tagonists of compromise ter part of li lowing his c osity and re

Elizabeth R. Spring, Md.

tyrant who uses his Mafia power to indulge a variety of whims, such as forbidding anyone on the street to refer to him by name: "Just look up quickly, as if searching a rock ceiling, when you mean 'The Fist.'" But his nephew and namesake is cut from a different cloth: when the younger Fausti decides that the threat of jail is a steep price to pay for a mobster's life of leisure, he tries his luck in the real world with decidedly mixed results. The bulk of the novel tracks the Fist's decline and demise in parallel with his nephew's efforts to establish himself beyond the Mob—but the book's real *raison d'être* is to give the audacious Breslin an opportunity to tell nonstop stories about the Mafia. He's at his best when he goes for laughs, particularly in the material involving Mafia trading cards, a mob priest named Father Phil and a vicious German shepherd named Malocchio, whose choice of victims inadvertently reflects the bigotry of his twisted owners. The lack of narrative structure makes this book a sticky read, but Breslin knows his subject and provides enough entertainment to justify wading through the slow spots. (May 23)

Forecast: *Ads in major national publications and the Sopranos-fueled Mafia mania should get the book some attention, but it will probably sell mostly to die-hard Breslin fans.*

DOG BITES MAN: City Shocked

JAMES DUFFY. *Simon & Schuster, \$24 (304p) ISBN 0-7432-1082-4*

Retired attorney Duffy—author of seven Reuben Frost mystery novels under the pseudonym Haughton Murphy—delivers a droll spoof of New York (city and state) political and social pretensions. Running against a Republican so disreputable that even Randilynn Foote, the somewhat shaky incumbent Republican governor, withholds her endorsement, Eldon Hoagland, a political science professor at Columbia, is elected mayor of New York City on the Democratic ticket. After a rather credible first year and a half in office, the highly intoxicated mayor departs a boozy reunion at the Fifth Avenue digs of his old Princeton roomie and is attacked and bitten after stepping on the leg of a pit bull urinating at the curb. His bodyguards shoot the animal as the dog's walker—a hunky Albanian with an expired green card—flees across Fifth Avenue into the bushes of Central Park. With no witnesses, the mayor decides to keep the incident mum. The dog's socially prominent owner, Sue Nation Brandberg, the mid-50-something Native American widow of a philanthropic billionaire, can't report the shooting to the authorities because of her houseboy lover's ille-

gal status. Sue enlists the aid of the sleazy publisher of a British-owned tabloid newspaper to track down the culprits. When the story breaks, animal rights crusaders and the clergy join the fray. His Honor admits the truth, and all hell breaks loose. The governor, who resents Hoagland—her former Columbia professor—because he once gave her a B-minus, seizes the opportunity for revenge, only to discover that vengeance can be a two-edged sword. This erudite comedy of errors is the equivalent of Damon Runyon in white tie and tails. (May)

ROBERT LUDLUM'S THE CASSANDRA COMPACT

ROBERT LUDLUM AND PHILIP SHELBY. *St. Martin's/Griffin, \$15.95 paper (356p) ISBN 0-312-25343-5*

Ludlum continues to imitate his imitators in his second Covert-One biotech thriller (after *The Hades Factor*), this time with coauthor Shelby (*Days of Drums*, etc.). Medical researcher and sometime spy Lt. Col. Jonathan Smith—aided by CIA agent Randi Russell, British operative Peter Howell and ultrasecret spymaster Nathaniel Klein—faces another villainous plot to unleash a deadly disease on an unsuspecting populace. Retired from the Army Medical Research Unit for Infectious Diseases after the death of his fiancée, Smith heads to Venice to meet a Russian scientist who is killed by Sicilian mercenaries before he can warn Smith that a sample of smallpox is about to be stolen from a Russian bioresearch facility. Up against a global military-corporate conspiracy with moles at NASA, the Pentagon and the KGB, Smith follows the smallpox across the Atlantic to Houston Mission Control and beyond. The cinematic chase through changing landscapes and mounting body count gives the book its rapid pace, while insider politics, trade-craft and technical wizardry lend an extra kick. Boilerplate dialogue ("The hit came down as arranged. But there was an unexpected development. I'm expecting an update shortly") and movie logic (after ordering the space shuttle to land in Nevada with the most virulent smallpox strain ever and several dead astronauts aboard, the president hops Air Force One to go meet it) show Ludlum may leverage his brand name, but no longer delivers the complex situations that earned him his reputation as a premier writer of international intrigue. *National advertising.* (May 15)

Forecast: *Ludlum died just last month, and word is he left a few books in the works. It's been a while since he was in top form, but some readers are bound to overlook the tell-tale "Robert Ludlum's" in the title.*

YELLOW

DON LEE. *Norton, \$22.95 (192p) ISBN 0-393-02562-4*

★ Set mostly in Rosarita Bay, a fictional coastal town near San Francisco, this debut collection from the editor of the literary journal *Ploughshares* traces the lives (usually the romantic lives) of a motley assortment of male protagonists. Lee examines the circumstances of Asians living in white society, as well as the differences—and occasional tensions, mostly unnoticed by Anglos—between persons of various Asian descents. "The Price of Eggs in China" finds gifted furniture designer Dean Kaneshiro caught in the middle of a feud between his girlfriend, Caroline Yip, and Marcella Ahn (aka the Oriental Hair Poets). Caroline is convinced that the more successful Marcella exists only to torment her, and Dean hatches a dubious plan to end their years-old rivalry. In "Voir Dire," public defender Hank Low Kwon grapples with his representation of a cocaine addict accused of beating his girlfriend's infant son to death. Hank's anxiety over the case—and his occupation in general—is exacerbated by the pregnancy of his own girlfriend, Molly, a blonde diving coach. And Korean-American oncologist Eugene Kim contemplates the peculiarities of mixed-race romances in "Domo Arigato," recalling an ill-fated weekend spent in Japan 20 years ago with a white girlfriend and her parents. Eugene wonders if "you couldn't overcome the hatreds of countries or race, any more than you could forgive someone for breaking your heart." Hatred and heartbreak, though, are mitigated by Lee's cool yet sympathetic eye and frequently dark sense of humor, as when, in the title story, young Danny Kim watches in horror as a drunk kisses his father on the mouth and proclaims, "I forgive you for Pearl Harbor." *Agent, Maria Massie.* (Apr.) **Forecast:** *This appealing collection shouldn't be relegated to Asian Studies shelves. The fact that Norton is the publisher, coupled with word-of-mouth interest among the literary set, may boost crossover appeal.*

THE WINTER GARDEN

JOHANNA VERWEERD, TRANS. FROM THE DUTCH BY HELEN RICHARDSON-HEWITT. *Bethany House, \$11.99 paper (288p) ISBN 0-7642-2523-5*

Holland's most popular Christian fiction writer offers her first novel in an elegant English translation, telling the story of Ika Boerema, a Dutch landscape designer who has fled a childhood scarred by the shame of her illegitimate birth and loveless parents. She is abruptly pulled back into this emotional past by a letter informing her of her mother's impending death. Ika must confront years of emo-

March 1, 2001

FICTION

281

seems to accept this situation, but does he still love his friend's wife? Does she still love him? And will Alice Ann succeed in her latest attempt to rejuvenate her sagging, vindictive marriage to Ralph? Complications ensue, both hilarious and sad, as this foursome and various lowlife literary friends career around the Bay Area, drinking, partying, fighting, walking out on checks, placating the police, and trying to resolve their romantic entanglements. As the story progresses, Ralph publishes a short story collection, and Jim a novel, both to critical acclaim, but neither event has much immediate impact on the messy particulars of their lives.

Easy, accessible prose tinged with nostalgia; characters both well developed and sympathetic in spite of their bad behavior: a fine, funny slice of literary life.

Kokoris, Jim
THE RICH PART OF LIFE
 St. Martin's (336 pp.)
 \$24.95
 May 2001
 ISBN: 0-312-27479-3

Winsomeness and whimsy are laid on with a trowel in this nevertheless quite likable debut about a suburban Illinois family transformed by outrageous misfortune, and even more outrageous good fortune.

While Theo Pappas, a 60-ish university history prof (and Civil War specialist) and his two sons are grieving the loss of the boys' mother, Theo wins \$190 million in a state lottery. Twelve-year-old Teddy (who narrates) begins mentally spending the money his father can't seem to deal with, and younger brother Tommy begins exhibiting increasingly deranged behavior, while the world beats a path to the Pappases' door, begging contributions for innumerable causes and crackpot schemes. Unmarried Aunt Bess (a wonderful comic character) joins the family, followed by seedy-looking Uncle Frank, a fast-talking producer of "genre" movies (which feature "vampire cheerleaders" and "*Celebrity Shewolves*"), hoping to elude the loan sharks on his trail. It isn't all as amusing as it should be, because too many scenes are unshaped and unfunny, and Kokoris doesn't know when to modulate the appearances of such initially promising figures as rapacious Gloria Wilcott, the bosomy neighbor who aims to capture Theo, or the campy leech known as Sylvania ("the vampire who starred in . . . Uncle Frank's movies")—a cross between Quentin Crisp and Ed Wood, Jr. The novel also flounders in an overextended account of a cheesy reenactment of the Battle of Bull Run (in which Theo is persuaded to impersonate "Stonewall" Jackson), and in the subplot involving Bobby Lee Anderson, the redneck stalker whose real relationship to the Pappases will not surprise any reader past adolescence. For all that, Teddy and especially five-year-old Tommy are vivid, engaging characters, and the story comes to life whenever Kokoris indulges his flair for farcical malapropism and misstatement ("This all reminds me of a Norman Rockwell movie," etc.).

And it has one immortal moment: Uncle Frank's sullen declaration that "By nature, Greeks are depressed people . . . We're not all Zorba." Now *that's* funny.

Lee, Don
YELLOW: Stories
 Norton (192 pp.)
 \$22.95
 Apr. 2001
 ISBN: 0-393-02562-4

Debut collection of seven intelligent short stories and a novella about Asian-Americans, mostly centered in coastal California, by the editor of *Ploughshares*.

Even at sea in a fishing boat, Lee anchors readers in the minds of his characters, who are deeply immersed in their occupations: piloting, engineering, golfing, making chairs, or even taking up amateur boxing. Yet work is always a vehicle through which the author defines characterizations and reveals emotion. In "The Price of Eggs in China," two poets—rich, swaddled Marcella Ahn and slobby, struggling Caroline Yip—publish at the same time, get reviewed in tandem, and then fade. Six years later, Caroline takes up with Dean Kaneshiro, an artist who hand-sculpts chairs (bought by the White House), but then finds her life again invaded by Marcella, who wants Dean for herself. "Widowers" limns two different responses to loss. Charter boat captain Alan Fujitani, whose wife died 20 years ago, takes a 22-year-old woman out to sea to dump her despised husband's ashes into the waves. They later strike up a wavering affair, though Alan is still heartbroken, haunted daily by memories of his dead spouse. Lee's most ambitious piece here is the novella, "Yellow," which gets under the skin of Korean Danny Kim. A dashing athletic and handsome student who beds but fails to stick with several white girls, he finally marries a Korean chosen by his mother. His wife is the first Asian woman he's ever slept with, and the marriage nearly dies under the pressure of his supremely disciplined climb toward a partnership in a Boston engineering firm. Danny's response to race prejudice is to attempt to rise above his skin. His story has an absolutely wonderful twist impossible to foresee, and it demonstrates Lee's strength in a longer form.

Memorable. May the author now fearlessly face a novel.

KIRKUS REVIEWS

Booklist
Chicago, IL

BI-WEEKLY

32,325

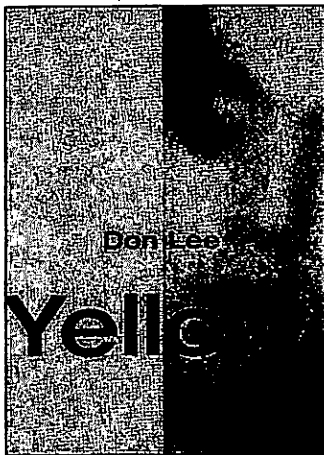
APR 1, 2001



M64765

LUCE PRESS CLIPPINGS

★ Lee, Don. *Yellow*. Apr. 2001. 192p. Norton, \$22.95 (0-393-02562-4). General Fiction



Just imagine Annie Yung. She's 38, with a good software job in Silicon Valley, but now she's listening to Patsy Cline, wearing tight jeans, cowboy boots, and a "bleached-blond hairdo that looked for all the world like a plastic stalagmite." She's looking for love in a cowboy bar in Rosarita Bay (aka Half Moon Bay, California). It's no surprise that the guy she meets turns out to have as many complications as she does. And Annie is typical of the Asian American characters you'll meet in these lyrical and intriguing short stories. There's surfer Duncan Roh, whose search for a woman to marry is getting nowhere. One of his lovers is a reference librarian whom he met at a meditation class where she was seeking relief from the great stress in her life caused by people asking stupid questions. She dumps Duncan for his lack of self-awareness. Each of Lee's achingly vulnerable characters deals with totally believable fears, plus an added layer of racial awareness. The final story, "Yellow," sums it all up in the struggles of handsome Danny Kim, whose

perspective is continually skewed by his fear of racism. The Rosarita Bay setting provides connection, but the characters also mingle, adding texture to a compelling, beautifully written collection. —Peggy Barber

BOOKS

Characters Seek Identity In 'Yellow'

By JEAN CHARBONNEAU

Don Lee readily admits that he considers himself primarily an editor, and never had a "real burning desire to be a writer." True, Lee is mostly known for his work as the editor of one of the country's top literary magazines, the Boston-based *Ploughshares*, but that's still a surprising way to start a conversation about his fine new short story collection, "Yellow" (Norton, \$22.95).

"Typically, as a writer, I'm a bleeder, not a gusher," Lee says. "I strain over every single sentence."

But in conversation, Lee's tone is like that of his stories—a melange of candor, intelligence and humor. The man clearly does not take himself too seriously, and he is as interesting as he is pleasant.

A third-generation Korean American, Lee lived in Tokyo and Seoul as a child. After obtaining a master's degree from Emerson College, he taught at the college for several years, where he got involved with *Ploughshares*. He has been directing the magazine—in which Mona Simpson, Ethan Canin, Tim O'Brien, Robert Pinsky and Laura Glen Louis published early stories, and whose guest editors have included Raymond Carver, Russell Banks and Tobias Wolff—for the past 12 years.

"Yellow," Lee's first book, is a collection of eight loosely interconnected stories featuring Asian

Americans trying to find their place—and themselves—in a society that doesn't always welcome them readily. Lee's close examination of the Asian American experience is at once amused, critical and satirical.

All the stories take place, at least partially, in Rosarita Bay, a fictional California seaside town, which is "pastoral and beautiful," not unlike a "little mountain village in Japan." This setting serves as a conducting line throughout the book.

"It's something that evolved on its own," Lee says. "First it was just a landscape I imagined for my characters to live in, but then it gained more importance as I went



DON LEE

along. And at the suggestion of my editor, I've finally made the town into some sort of character in itself."

Many of the characters in "Yellow" are fragile, paralyzed emotionally, insecure about whom they are. Many lack the tools to deal with the crushing weight of their loneliness. One is a poet ravaged by her failures, another a once idealistic lawyer turned bitter and cynical by his experiences as a public defendant, another an aging surfer who doesn't realize that his compulsive dating of women hides a failure to communicate with his true self.

Interestingly enough, the strongest character of them all is also the youngest. At the end of "Casual Water," after having been abandoned by both his mother and father, 18-year-old Patrick Fenney asks himself, "What was it that made people so weak?"

"That's a crucial line," says Lee. For him, the title of his book is a double entendre. Of course it pertains to what it is to be Asian American in a predominantly white nation, but it also evokes slang for lack of courage. His collection's main theme, he

says, "is paralysis, fear, of which racial paranoia is one manifestation."

Race is one of the collection's motifs, but Lee never beats the reader over the head with it, and not once does he fall into the holier-than-thou trap. "I didn't want to step on my soapbox as I tackled the subject of racism," he says. "This is a book of fiction, after all, not a pamphlet." But one of his intents was to participate in the "continuing debate about race relations in the U.S."

Lee is particularly adept at demonstrating that racism does not have to be overt or violent to be hurtful. Things like being asked "What are you?" all the time can sting just as much, if not more, than two drunks uttering the word "Chink," as happens in the title story.

"Many books these days are about the Asian immigrant experience as people arrive in America," he continues. "I wanted to write about second and third generation Asians, talk about their lives here, their daily existence, their problems and their moments of happiness. The book was also an opportunity to combat stereotypes, to show that Asian Americans, just like everybody else, have needs, longings, hopes. That they can be as screwed-up as anybody else."

Lee's style is fluid and easygoing, and the structure of his stories is straightforward. His narratives are not experimental in form, nothing like that of jugglers of words and prose pirouettists such as Rick Moody or David Foster Wallace.

It is obvious, on the other hand, that he enjoys keeping his readers on their proverbial toes. His characters are very direct, and have a tendency to say surprising things. For instance, the confused Korean American, Patsy Cline-wannabe in "The Lone Cantina," who spurts to the cowboy she just met in a bar that she is "just having your everyday nervous breakdown."

Lee is also very good at planting a sentence in his story that startles the reader as well as jump-starting the narrative: "He was in love, wildly happy, and, as a consequence, he was sadder than he'd ever been in his life." He admits that

this is part of his strategy as a writer, recognizing the importance of the element of surprise in fiction.

"But my main concern as a writer is to tell a story. I believe in plot. I like a story that carries along the reader." Richard Yates had a huge influence on him, Lee says. "Yates used to be a regular at a bar in Boston. I'd go see him, have a drink with him, and we'd talk. He would say that with time, he realized that telling a story is what matters most."

The collection's last story, "Yellow," is actually a novella. It chronicles the 20-year inner struggle of a man rebelling against his own culture, his own identity, having the "desire to repudiate his Asian-ness." course, his is a lost cause.

When asked if he had been tempted to make it into a novel, Lee admits he thought about it a lot, that he could have "filled it in." But for him, the piece feels finished. It is. Besides, "filling in" is usually a formula for disaster in fiction.

Lee writes short stories and is the editor of a literary magazine that features them (as well as poetry). The assumption is the short fiction is his favorite literary form.

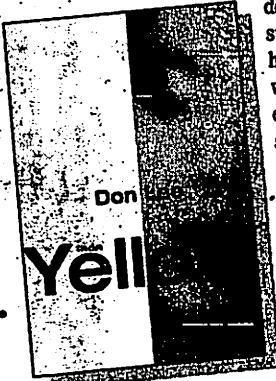
"Definitely, yes," he replies. "Short fiction is an underrated craft, too often considered mere practice for writers who truly accomplish themselves once they produce novels. But short-story writing is an artistic entity on its own, with its own rules and difficulties. Andre Dubus and John Cheever were better at short fiction than at novel writing, and that doesn't make them minor authors."

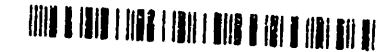
That being said, for his next book, Lee is accommodating the demands of today's book market, which favors novels.

"It'll take place in 1980, during the Iran hostage crisis, and involve an interracial love triangle among American diplomats in Tokyo, a missing Korean American woman, and a Japanese cop. Sort of a literary mystery, though I don't know if there will be much emphasis on the mystery."

And in a last elan of frankness, he blurts "But the whole idea of writing a novel terrifies me."

Jean Charbonneau is a free-lance writer in Windsor, Ontario, whose book reviews appear regularly in the Cleveland Plain Dealer, Denver Post, Toronto Star and Memphis Commercial Appeal. He wrote this article for The Courant.





LUCE

P5652

PRESS CLIPPINGS

Provocative stories of Asian Americans

"Yellow"

by Don Lee
W.W. Norton, \$22.95

BY WINGATE PACKARD
Special to *The Seattle Times*

"Yellow" is the first collection of short stories by Don Lee, who edits the literary journal *Ploughshares*. Lee's stories take up the issues facing Asian Americans in white America. The protagonist in each story is an Asian-American man, mostly Korean Americans, but there are several Japanese Americans, too.

These lively and relevant stories are set in the fictional town of Rosarita Bay, Calif., and are inter-related; some stories are concluded or made meaningful by information in other stories, a marvelous organizing technique that produces the effect of a grapevine through a community.

The common setting gives the accumulated stories a novelistic breadth with the electric snap of short stories.

In "Voir Dire," Hank Low Kwon is a public defender in a child-abuse and murder case. His white girlfriend, Molly, a diving coach at the nearby university, represents to Hank "joy found in challenging limits and conquering the elements, being fearless, perfect, indomitable. Hank envied

her. There were no moral ambiguities in her life. What she did was pure." Meanwhile, he is tired of being assigned to defend — perhaps because he is Asian — Asian immigrant junkies like his current client.

Duncan Roh is the protagonist in "The Possible Husband." This story describes a comical series of four relationships in four seasons, and Lee manages to pack in a lot of the humor of gender and ethnic projections without drawing clichéd characters.

Duncan's passion is surfing. It is the transcendental thrill of elemental experience he wants, where nothing has "meaning" the way everything in a nonwhite person's life has "meaning" in America, or the way everything has "meaning" in a relationship. "He wasn't obliged to anyone who could get in his way or disappoint him. He was out there on the terrible sea, and it was pointless and deadly, what he was doing, and it was beautiful." Lee's descriptions of tremendous waves smoking in and imploding are exquisite.

"Yellow" is a novella about Duncan's girlfriend's brother, Danny Kim, growing up defensive and proud, distancing himself from his immigrant parents and Asian issues out of fear. Recent Asian-American history creeps

into the story when Danny reacts to the 1983 murder of Vincent Chin, the Chinese American beaten to death in Detroit by white American autoworkers. Only when he saves the life of the despairing white man with whom he has been competing for a promotion does he begin to understand the fear that has dominated his life.

These are powerful, well-crafted and provocative stories.

Shades of identity

Korean Americans walk a
fine line between two
cultures in 'Yellow'

BY ALIX OHLIN

Special to the American-Statesman

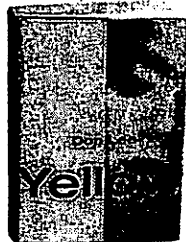
In "Yellow," Don Lee gives us eight stories centered on the fictional California coastal town of Rosarita Bay. "In theory quaint and pretty," Lee writes, the town "was actually a no-man's land, a sleepy, slightly seedy backwater with the gray air of anonymity."

Lee's characters, mostly Korean Americans, maneuver through this no-man's land, looking for love and a surer sense of identity. Although the characters appear in more than one story, Lee is not that concerned with these intersections.

Instead he cares about his characters' relations with their families, who are sometimes more bound to Korean culture than they are, and with their lovers, white and Asian. Their greatest confrontation is with the identity of "Asian American," that troubling duality whose meanings Lee probes with sensitive, almost journalistic precision.

In the first story, "The Price of Eggs in China," a maker of fine furniture named Dean tries to make a life with Caroline, a neurotic poet who believes she is being stalked by a competitor. The two female poets have had books published around the same time, with similar jacket photos, "the two women looking solemn and precious, hair flowing in full regalia." The results were terrible: "Critics couldn't resist reviewing them together, mocking the pair, even then, as 'The Oriental Hair Poets,' 'The Braids of the East' and 'The New Asian Poe-tresses.'"

As Dean tries to protect Caroline's fragile mental state, the story undergoes a neat set of twists so that you are never sure who the crazy one is. In just a few pages, Lee combines elements of mystery, a sweet love story and a telling satire on ethnic pigeonholing.



Yellow

By Don Lee
W.W. Norton,
\$22.95

Other stories in the collection are not as successful. In "The Lone Night Cantina," a dissatisfied computer programmer from Silicon Valley comes to Rosarita Bay to visit her sister and decides to take on a new look as a Korean American cowgirl, "who was wearing shiny gray buckskin cowboy boots and a red-sateen, western-cut shirt tucked into tight Levi's, who was talking like a she-hick buckaroo, and who was sporting a bleached-blond hairdo that looked for all the world like a plastic stalagmite."

Showing up every night at the bar that gives the story its title, the programmer eventually meets a man as lonely as she is. It's a great setup for a story, which unfortunately fizzles to a drawn-out, inconclusive end.

The final story, "Yellow," is the book's set piece. More than 50 pages long, it chronicles several decades in the life of Daniel Kim. Daniel grows up in Rosarita Bay, heads off to college in L.A. and eventually lands in Boston with a Korean wife and children.

As the years pass, Lee's descriptions of Daniel's life can be annoyingly expository and flat: "Studying mechanical engineering, he became all too aware that the campus was separated by a demilitarized zone of its own, the North housing the arts and humanities, the South the sciences, which were dominated by Asians. The stereotypes which traditionally befell science majors were racially endemic at U.C.L.A.: thick glasses, a calculator on the belt, high floodwater trousers." All very true and believable, but the essayistic tone seems to belong more to social history than to living, breathing fiction.

Nonetheless, by sticking with Daniel — a tight-lipped, intransigent character, not immediately sympathetic for so long, through multiple relationships and incidents both racially motivated and otherwise, Lee builds up a rewarding degree of intimacy. The way that Daniel, in middle age, finally feels at home in his own skin becomes truly affecting.

Without deluding himself about the realities of race in the United States, Daniel finds out that a person can still learn to love his own face.

Alix Ohlin, a student at UT's Michener Center for Writers, is a free-lance reviewer.

ASM

DEFLATING STEREOTYPES

Stories Reveal Asian-American Realities

YELLOW, by Don Lee; Norton, \$22.95.

Reviewed by
RHEA R. BORJA

Though many have lived in this country for generations, Asian-Americans often still register just in the periphery of our collective conscience, usually in the context of stereotypes or international news. The image of Asians as math whizzes or hard-working immigrants is one example. The alleged spy activity of former Los Alamos nuclear scientist Wen Ho Lee is another.

But in this promising debut, writer Don Lee moves beyond reductive clichés and sensational headlines. Instead, he explores the lives and longings of a disparate group of Asian-Americans in a small California town wedged between San Francisco and Santa Cruz. The result is a rich tapestry of human emotions, a wry and knowing look at "post-immigration" America.

YELLOW is a collection of interwoven short stories and one novella whose characters live in the fictional Rosarita Bay, a town whose provincial charm doesn't quite mask its rough edges. The unmistakably American characters represent a variety of Asian backgrounds — Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Filipino. But most important, we see them as human beings in all their imperfect glory.

There's Annie Yung, a Silicon Valley database programmer who swoons over Patsy Cline and fakes a hick accent in a Western-theme bar in hopes of snagging a modern-day cowboy.

She's had a number of failed relationships. One was the marriage to a Harley-riding and philandering Korean-American. Then there was the second marriage to a Swedish architect who fell in love with a Mormon — and male — podiatrist.

And of course, there was the string of white men afflicted with "A.H.F., Asian Hottie Fetish, wanting her to titter with high-cheeked China-doll timidity, or vamp it up as a wanton Suzie Wong, a dirty little yum-yum girl."

YET ANNIE'S sadness over these relationships is layered with a determination to improve her life, however quirkily.

In the sly and humorous "The Price of Eggs in China," artist Dean Kaneshiro tries to settle an old feud between two Asian-

American poets, one of whom is his girlfriend. Known collectively as "The Oriental Hair Poets," the women have been rivals since their books came out at the same time. One poet received critical acclaim, while the other, Caroline Yip, Dean's girlfriend, was panned.

Now the more successful poet moves into Rosarita Bay, right smack on Caroline's turf, and Dean devises a way to stop the rivalry and create a happy ending for him and Caroline.

Lee also skillfully probes the perplexity and anger some of the characters feel when racism — both subtle and overt — comes into view. He doesn't wax pedantic about mainstream America's outdated view of what it means to be American; he lets you experience it.

In the novella "Yellow," from

which the collection takes its name, Danny Kim is an Asian-American success story. Tall and handsome with athletic grace and a quick and analytical intelligence, Kim quickly scales America's corporate ladder.

Yet he's also emotionally frozen, unwilling to make himself vulnerable to other people, including his own family. This rigidity worsens as he becomes more successful; he sees the resentment some feel over his professional accomplishments, in part because he's Asian. Danny in turn resents the prejudice of people who should know better.

AT AN exclusive benefit dinner, an old widow says to Danny that she loves Korean markets, adding, "I don't know what I'd do without my Mr. Song. You Koreans are the hardest working people I know."

Danny gives an acid reply, shocking the bewildered widow. His Korean-American wife, Rachel, berates him later, saying, "She was trying to give you a compliment."

His reply is unrepentant: "No stereotype is innocent. You can't excuse bigotry because it's well intended."

Lee, who edits the literary journal *Ploughshares*, opens a window into 21st-Century Asian-America and deftly portrays it with humor, sympathy, and a little righteous anger. Read *Yellow* for its good story-telling as well as its observations on what being "American" means.

■ Rhea R. Borja is a Metro reporter covering education for the Times-Dispatch.

