

Charlie Chan Is Dead

An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Fiction

Jessica Hagedorn, Editor

NEW YORK: PENGUIN BOOKS, 1993
XXX + 569 PAGES

This jumbo anthology does not limit its purview to short stories, for it includes excerpts from such well-known Asian-American novels as Maxine Hong Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey* and Joy Kogawa's *Itsuka*. On the other hand, quite a few of the selections come from the pen of relative newcomers to fiction writing, such as graduate students. Familiar North American backdrops and colloquialisms are sprinkled throughout the approximately fifty selections, which read more like American literature with a mildly Asian flavor than like any particular Asian national literature.

"Asian" in this anthology would more accurately be termed "East Asian"—apart from two brief selections from authors of South Asian descent, the anthology's authors trace their ancestry to Japan, China, Korea, or the eastern littoral regions of Southeast Asia, mostly the Philippines and Vietnam. This book's focus on immigrants from eastern and southeastern Asia seems appropriate, for an anthology which attempted to draw together culturally disparate writings from each quadrant of Asia would probably obscure the mainly East and Southeast Asian character of most Asian ethnic communities in North America—the editor herself is an immigrant from the Philippines.



Practically none of the selections portrays North America as a den of iniquity where bigotry or other negative factors invariably overshadow benefits like economic opportunity and constitutionally-protected civil liberties, as the polemical preface by Elaine Kim attempts to drum into the reader. The anthology's excerpt from Ruthanne Lum McCunn's *Thousand Pieces of Gold* probably comes the closest to Kim's viewpoint, for this selection grimly describes the flesh trade in Chinese women in the aftermath

of the California Gold Rush, and focuses on the anti-foreign sentiment that resulted in the U.S.'s late nineteenth-century "Chinese exclusion acts."

A relatively contemporary perspective on what the U.S. offers its citizens and immigrants of East Asian ancestry may be sampled in Cherylene Lee's "Safe," which pithily describes the disapproval the narrator's conservative parents express for their son's weird but personally satisfying career choice as a kind of stuntman performer. Were this particular family to have stayed in East Asia instead of having emigrated to America, community and peer pressure would have almost surely steered the son in a more traditional career direction out of consideration for his family. In contrast, various drawbacks of North American liberty and individualism garner a touching dramatization in Joy Kogawa's award-winning *Itsuka*. In this moving work, the dutiful Japanese Canadian narrator must shoulder practically all the burden of care-giving in the wake of her careerist brother's apathy towards

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BOOK REVIEWS

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the dying Obasan, who had shown loving devotion when bringing up the two siblings in their childhood days.

Teachers without a specialization in Asian American literature will be relieved to find that the editor of *Charlie Chan Is Dead* has provided helpful biographical information about each author in a footnote on the title page of each selection. However, the arrangement of the book's material leaves something to be desired, for Hagedorn has grouped the anthology's stories neither into any recognizable historical or literary framework, nor along national or ethnic lines (Chinese American, Japanese American, Filipino American, etc.). Instead, the editor has simply plunked down an alphabetized list of the authors' surnames, and listed the stories in that rather haphazard order; the result is a shapeless table of contents that resembles an index.

Teachers who comb through half a thousand pages of short stories in an attempt to formulate classroom assignments and presentations will not receive much assistance from either Kim's preface or Hagedorn's introduction, both of which go to great lengths to celebrate differences between Asian Americans and decry passé Asian American media stereotypes. These may be laudable sentiments, but such repeated complaints about fading images in U.S. popular culture do nothing to help teachers organize this anthology's abundant material into discrete segments that are accessible and comprehensible to students. For do-it-yourself types and for teachers who have already assembled ample interpretive or secondary material on this subject, however, *Charlie Chan Is Dead* could be the optimal choice as a textbook of primary readings. ■

PHILIP F. C. WILLIAMS is an Associate Professor at Arizona State University. He specializes in twentieth-century Chinese literature and interdisciplinary humanities. Aside from authoring and editing scholarly books, he has co-authored the new language primer, *Chinese the Easy Way* (Hauppauge, NY: Barron's Educational Series, 1999).

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Robin Kervin, *Education About Asia*
105A Hunter Hall #4154
University of Tennessee at Chattanooga,
Chattanooga, TN 37403
Phone: 423-785-2118 • E-mail: Robin-Kervin@utc.edu.