

A Conversation with
Fae Myenne Ng
author of
Steer Toward Rock
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Q: What was your starting point for *Steer Toward Rock*?

A: My main character, Jack Moon Szeto, chooses love over the law. *Steer Toward Rock* is inspired about the devastating consequences of The Chinese Confession Program. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 is another point of inspiration. Before 1882, America had an open door policy that admitted everyone except “lepers, prostitutes and morons.” The Chinese were added to that list with the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. The Act was repealed in 1942 at which point a paltry 105 Chinese were allowed entry each year. No quota existed for any other group.

By 1940, 80% of Chinese in America were men. Married men left their wives in China, unmarried men remained so and a bachelor society was created. In America, anti-miscegenation laws prohibited marriage not only between whites and blacks, but also between whites and Asians, Mexicans and Filipinos; this was not ruled unconstitutional until 1967. This legacy of transcontinental marriages and fractured families has had a profound effect on our security as families and on our intimate views of love and sexuality, themes which I explore in *Steer Toward Rock*.

Q: What was the Chinese Confession Program?

A: The Chinese Confession Program (1956 to 1965) was set up to prevent communists from entering the US fraudulently. Posters were tacked onto lampposts, and community and civic leaders asked Chinese Americans with derivative citizenship (called ‘paper sons’ because of their fraudulent papers) to come forward. The Confession Program wasn’t officially an amnesty program. Confessing to the authorities offered immunity from prosecution and deportation, but the confessor had to surrender his passport and be ‘amenable to deportation.’

One confession could implicate an entire clan as the confessor was required to name his paper and blood families. If you hadn’t confessed and then were stopped by FBI agents, you could be deported. My mother remembered it as a terrifying time. She said agents came into our store and asked men for their ID and once took a man straight to SFO (the San Francisco airport). As I dramatize in the last chapter of the book, *deport* was a powerful word, maybe our collective ‘first’ English word.

When a man confessed, he was required to name his entire family, paper and blood. If a man didn't confess, he could still be named by his neighbor. Anyone could inform anonymously and accuse another of communist affiliation (sending a letter or money to your mother in Red China was cavorting with the enemy!) Paranoia and conflict set into Chinatown. Trust was a huge issue. Suspicion was rampant as friends and brothers were forced to look at each other with fear and distrust. Everyone wondered who was confessing and who was being named.

At the program's conclusion, 13,895 people confessed, 22,083 were exposed and 11,294 potential paper son slots were closed. The 1950 census listed 117,629 Chinese in America (without counting Hawaii); this had tremendous impact on the Chinese American community. **

I call it the Confusion Program. It took many drafts to figure out a structure and narrative that combined the elements of political fear, personal desire, family loyalty and community obligation. It was the love story that finally brought all the themes together.

Q: Does the plot of *Steer Toward Rock* intersect with your personal experience?

A: You mean what is autobiographical? This was the first story I heard, the one I always wanted to tell, but one I didn't trust myself to write. My father was one of the 13,895 who confessed. Like many in his generation, he entered the Chinese Confession Program without full understanding of its consequences.

My father confessed knowing it was a no-win situation. As a child of a confessor, I have an inheritance of indecision. I call it my confession tic; I flip-flop. Taking a decade and a half to write the book is proof. Whose point of view was best? Jack's or Joice's? First person or close third? Jack's left or right hand or just a finger? Which one? I can really annoy myself.

Q: Why did it take you fifteen years to write *Steer Toward Rock*?

A: I didn't think I'd ever finish, I was sure I'd take it to the grave. Life happened. After *Bone* was published, I worked on a manuscript called *The Cat King*, set in the '40s, about two men, paper-brothers in love with the same woman (she can't decide who she loves best). I moved to Rome and finished a version of it, but it was flat and evasive and there was no true love in it. When I moved back to New York, my hard disk crashed and I had no back up. I tried to rewrite it, but mainly I tried to stay quiet. I listened to a woman in stilettos above my studio and then to wild coyotes in the high desert, two songs that found their way into the book.

My aunt (my mother's younger and only sibling) died suddenly and then several months later, her mother (my grandmother). My mother, terminally ill, hung on, determined, she told me, to be there when my book was done. I am the eldest daughter of an eldest daughter of an eldest daughter and the terror of losing my mother could not be expressed directly. I was flying back to San Francisco a lot, and the book was a safe place to

deposit my fears. Then, it was called *The Book of Lies* and was Jack's confession of lost love. There was no daughter character and there was more violence.

My aunt was quiet and gentle and she embroidered like an artisan. After her funeral, I flew back to New York. My father called as I boarded the bus; he's near deaf and I shouted into the phone for several minutes. A young woman in the front seat asked to use my phone and when she handed it back, she asked if I wrote *Bone*. I considered lying, but since she was Asian, I figured I couldn't get away with it. She told me she was a poet, and then asked when the next book was coming out. That's when I flew off the bus. I don't know what I was thinking except that I had to get away from a question that felt as potent as, when was my mother going to die? Back in my studio, I thought I was safe, but I was horrified: where was my laptop? I had left it on the bus. So I had to rewrite the book, write it new and better. I added Veda, and with a daughter's presence, a fuller world arrived.

After my mother died, I talked to my father every night. One month I saw that I had clocked in over 3,000 minutes. Once I even fell asleep, but when I woke, he was still talking!

Time taught me. Time paid us all back. I learned to feel the 'luxuriousness' of time and to treasure my parents' gift of timelessness. My mother taught me, my mother allowed me: What is not spoken is as vital as the sung song. My parents worked hard so that I could have joy in my work. I was a blissful workaholic for fifteen years, fifteen enriching years. I feel I wrote the book my parents dreamed.

Q: You seem to resist the pattern of writing about immigrants' experience through the lens of their interactions with white Americans. The Chinatown of *Steer Toward Rock* is almost wholly sealed away from the rest of San Francisco - can you talk about that?

A: You mean, why aren't there more white people in the book? This was the world created by the exclusion laws. The ruling whites didn't want to mingle with the Chinese so I wanted the world of *Steer Toward Rock* to reflect that reality. The white Americans are a lawyer (good authority), Louie's mistress (outlaw love), and the guy who holds the deeds to Gold Szeto's property (smart partner). There is a very painful history of lynching and looting and driving out of the Chinese in America. Contact with outsiders was a learned fear. Insularity was a protective measure. This is my training: looking outward, breaking out.

Q: Is there any significance to the fact that the daughters in both of your novels move to the East Coast and take jobs in the airline industry?

A: I hadn't realized it! Escape. I come from a generation of escapees. Everyone always wanted to run away.

Q: What is the Flowery Kingdom?

A: Flowery Kingdom is a street term for America. To the early immigrants, the stars on the flag looked like flowers, so they called America the Kingdom of the Flowery Flag. I like how it captures the old-timers' romantic spirit, life can be bleak but they see flowers!

Another term, The Lord of the Peach Blossoms, is a bon vivant, a lady's man. The Chinese Exclusion Law created an imbalance. As I said before, in 1940, 80% of Chinese in America were men. The loneliness was profound. Every man was a Lord, but the garden had no peaches!

Q: Why have you set both of your novels in San Francisco's Chinatown?

A: Chinatown is a home base for Veda in *Steer Toward Rock* as it is for Leila in *Bone*. I like to write about characters who crave escape and then crave return (again, that inheritance of indecision).

Joice returns to repay a debt. Jack returns to his mother to pay his last respects. Veda returns to make Jack legal. For me, Chinatown of the '60s—the romance and hope and safety of it—doesn't exist anymore, so I return to it in my imagination.

Q: What did you want to capture of Chinatown of the '60s and does it still exist today?

A: I taught writing to immigrants as part of the Lila Wallace Reader's Digest Writers' Award, and what I learned was that things are even harder today, the risks more extreme. The burdens of parents raising children and of children ushering parents through the maze of American bureaucracy is as demanding if not more so. Once, I stood behind a girl in the checkout line of the Chinatown library and saw her holding a copy of *Bone*. I knew not to tap her on the shoulder, the Ctown in me figured, hey, give the girl some privacy. I wouldn't have appreciated it myself. As a kid, I wanted everybody to shut up and leave me alone. If I was reading, I was less likely to be yelled at or called on to iron collars or cook the rice or wash diapers.

My Chinatown of the '60s had a village intimacy. I wanted to capture the new immigrants' hope and idealism alongside the terror and fear of McCarthyism. I wanted to show the courage and resiliency of the community, the romance of a generation who left their homeland to try and raise a family on inhospitable land. I no longer live there, but Chinatown is still my fertile ground.

Q: Do you think the experience of being an immigrant in America has changed at all between the 1950s and today?

A: Though there may be more social services and programs available, there are still unequal and inconsistent US policies. The contributions of all immigrants to American growth and prosperity have never been fully acknowledged.

Q: How did you come by your intimate knowledge of the butcher's trade? Your descriptions of Jack's work are almost tender.

A: Tender and tortured. Every day, I followed my mother into butcher shops, fascinated with the interactions. There was a famous lady butcher, very bovine, who inspired us girls to take cleavers to Chinese school to fight the boys.

Meals were my parents' one luxury. I watched them slaughter chickens, rare birds, lobsters, crabs and live fish, turtles, once a frog, or was it a toad? The prep was terrifying, but when served, the meal was a gift of ultimate love.

Q: Talk a little bit about how you structured *Steer Toward Rock*.

A: The book is separated into five sections:

Report is Jack's telling.

Respond is the consequence of his telling.

Requite is the repayment of his telling.

Return is the completion of Jack's telling. He says, 'This is a story for a lover, this is not a story for a daughter.' Then he hands over the narrative to his daughter.

Release, the final section, is Veda's telling. She lets go. She lets her father have his past, she lets herself have her future.

Bao is the first ideogram of the pair of Chinese characters that open each section. The five sections of the book explore Bao, which is the complex balance of obligation in social relationships.

Veda's best friend, MiMi Yue, refutes this practice: "Could you please stop with the obligation crap, we're not playing that payback game, OK? I don't give you a horse on your birthday and I don't want you sending over two studs on mine. You don't owe me and I don't owe you. We're friends because we want to be and if we become enemies, it'll be about something real. Not guilt, not regret."

Q: What is the motif that appears on every chapter heading?

A: It's a seal carving of Hon Pak, which means Confess. It was the mantra of my childhood and I hope its 'stamp' at the beginning of each chapter gives a sense of the power and pressure of this mandate on the community. Fathers stopped each other in the street, asking, "You! You confess?" In Chinese movies, I heard judges yelling at criminals, "Confess!" It was exciting to think of my father as an outlaw (Chinese outlaws

were romantic), but frightening to think that he might be deported (American law was terrifying). Once I asked my father what he confessed and he told me not to ask so many questions. That's probably why I became a writer; I couldn't get a straight answer out of anyone.

Q: Was it easier to write from Jack's perspective or from Veda's?

A: Both had unique challenges. My goal was to write from the 'inside.' In creating Jack's voice, I wanted to share not only his confusion but also his integrity and intelligence. Even in those extreme moments of absolute illogic, frustration and fear, Jack's language had cadence and generosity. He was heroic. Though his knowledge of American law was incomplete, his pride as a father was complete. He made good on his promises. He kept his word.

Veda is a free agent between two languages. I wanted to capture her defiance. After witnessing how her father lived in fear, she tries to sound fearless, but we can hear the truth.

Q: Why do both of your novels use first person narrators?

A: The intimacy of a first-person narrative invites the reader inside the experience. In this way, I break the goal of the exclusion laws, that we would lock ourselves into ghettos, that we would indeed shut up.

I wanted Jack's own confession of his confession. Popular culture portrays Chinese men as stoic and silent, but the Chinese men I know don't shut up and I wanted to create a narrative around that verbosity. As the exclusion laws' aim was to destroy the Chinese American family, I strip Jack of all family. As sons were favored in traditional Chinese families, I give Jack a daughter.

Jack's voice builds in a daughter who will have an even stronger voice, and not only because Veda has English. He has been training her all along, we realize. Veda is a tough kid who turns out to be a tougher woman.

Q: Why does Veda narrate the final section?

A: After Jack finishes telling his story, he feels naturalized to the new land. (We become Americans when we tell our story.) He says, "My story is native to our history but it need not be our root. A naturalized plant is new life. So I hand over my story. Let her tell. Let her not. Let her find a way through the story so that it frees her."

In *Release*, the final section, Veda takes over the narrative, tells her own story and accepts that Jack's past is not her burden to bear.

Q: Even though you employ an intimate, confessional tone in both Jack's and Veda's narratives, there is also an element of silence, of not telling. Why?

A: I like the white space, what's not on the page is important. I'm interested in how Jack and Veda protect each other with not telling, which is not silence, but a deliberate stillness.

Veda meets Jack's mother in China but decides not to tell him, proof she has learned what Jack hoped to teach her: knowing is not always necessary. And when Jack senses Veda has endured something traumatic, he doesn't force her to talk and tell. He understands: 'sometimes a child only wants to be near a parent.' For both of them, not telling is an act of loving.

My father laughs whenever I tell him how much I love him. Then he says, Well, there's nothing left to talk about. Love. Our last word.

Q: Do Chinese men of your father's generation really talk like Jack?

A: Which is a nice way of saying, what the hell is Jack talking about? Jack's language is out there because of the distance he has had to travel in order to make sense of his life. At first he seems incomprehensible because there's no translating his sorrow. But there's a gut truth behind his words that is fully comprehensible. Jack's tenderness toward Veda was the guide I used to fine tune his language. Jack realizes that he has no power in the world Veda must survive in, so his only guidance is this: Make your own happiness, everything is worth that.

Q: Why does Jack decide to enter the Confession Program when Joice has already said she won't marry him?

A: Jack chooses love over the law. He's a romantic who sacrifices everything for the mere hope of love. Jack hopes that breaking his contract with Gold Szeto will prove his love to Joice. For Jack, confession was his greatest expression of trust and belief. Remember, his name means 'To Have Trust.'

Q: Why does Joice decide to keep the baby when she doesn't love Jack and refuses to marry him?

A: Defiance, independence. Traits valued in modern America but considered selfish in immigrant culture. Joice rebels against the way she was raised: to think first of the group, the family, the community. She dares to think of her own happiness first.

Q: How do Joice and Jack and Ilin experience love differently?

A: Simply put, Joice believes intimacy is in sharing, Jack believes it is in caring. Is it a gender, culture or just a difference in communication styles? Jack is a be-er. Joice is a

do-er. Each style annoys the hell out of the other. Jack and Joice are pioneers of love, meeting on some frontier, hoping to nurture something on barren soil.

Ilin's sense of love is duty-bound. She promises to bring her beloved mother to America, but her mother dies and Ilin is set adrift with all her stored up love so she becomes the stand-in mother for Veda. And Veda is a mess in love! But her first victory is to love her father.

Q: Talk about the sexuality of Joice and her daughter, Veda. They both seem to favor sex in alleys, is it a mother-daughter thing? Why does Veda have sex with the Austrian tourist?

A: Sex is Joice's passport out of Chinatown. Veda fucks the Austrian in the alley to shut him up. Sex in alleyways, sex on the run, sex on the sly, I believe it is all part of the lingering effects of the exclusionary laws. It not only affected our sense of family, but of love and sexuality.

Q: Is there a message you want readers to take away from *Steer Toward Rock*?

A: Jack's last memory of his mother is of going across the river with her. As the boat heads straight toward a big rock she reads the carved characters, 'Come Toward Me'; it will be her final act of love. She tells him 'Trust Rock. Break your fear on rock.'

Jack will return to this moment when an act of retribution befalls him. He will remember what his mother taught him: Go toward your fear, trust life, trust that it will lead you to safety.

To request an interview with Fae Myenne Ng, please contact:
Allison McGeehon, Senior Publicist, Hyperion
allison.mcgeehon@abc.com / 212-456-0173
For more information, please visit www.HyperionBooks.com

** Statistic from *Chinese America: The Untold Story of America's Oldest New Community* (Hardcover) by Peter Kwong (Author), Dusanka Miscevic (Author).