



# Wendy Law-Yone

## Biography

Born in Mandalay, raised in Rangoon, and now living in the United States, Burmese writer Wendy Law-Yone is the author of two critically acclaimed novels, *The Coffin Tree* and *Irrawaddy Tango*. Both attempt to capture the displacement and cultural anxiety engendered by the colonial enterprise, migration, and political upheaval. The daughter of famous Burmese journalist U Law-Yone, the author is outspoken in her support of Burmese artists, many of whom are in exile. Firmly situated in what has been called the “post-colonial moment,” Law-Yone’s inclusion in a wide array of courses about the Asian-American experience testify to her relevance, talent, and political commitment to articulating a South-east Asian perspective -- a perspective that is increasingly colored by its contact with the West.

Law-Yone’s first novel, *The Coffin Tree* (1983), is a remarkable depiction of the fears, rootlessness, and alienation of recent immigrants to this country: the unnamed narrator and her half-brother Shan come to this country in the late 1960s to escape the political turmoil which threatens to engulf her family. Unlike many narratives which de-center the non-Western origins of recent immigrants, *The Coffin Tree* takes pains to emphasize the uniquely Burmese heritage of the two main characters. The first half of the novel deals largely with their experiences at home: the traumatic ethnic/class divisions within the family itself (the older Shan is the product of a liason between the military father and a “hill” woman, a member of a disadvantaged ethnic minority in Burma, while the narrator is the product of a more ethnically “acceptable” parent), the power obsession of their dictatorial father that ultimately leads to the family’s dissolution, and the numerous small ways in which the narrator and Shan are shaped by the culture and atmosphere of their native country into a self-awareness denied by their new home in America.

### Quick Facts

- \* Born in 1947
- \* Burmese-American novelist and journalist
- \* Author of *The Coffin Tree* and *Irrawaddy Tango*



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## Biography continued

Law-Yone's skillful characterization in this novel allows readers to develop an empathy with the narrator and Shan, particularly as they experience first-hand the indifference, or utter cruelty of an American society ill-equipped to deal with difference. It is treatment that will send Shan spiralling into paranoia and death, and the narrator into a suicide attempt and a mental hospital.

*Irrawaddy Tango* (1993), the author's most recent work, deals with similar themes of estrangement, mental instability, the effects of colonialism, and the immigrant experience. As with *The Coffin Tree*, Law-Yone's facility for vibrant, engaging characterization marks this text as a premier example of the new literature by international authors -- literature that takes pains to announce its political commitment at the same time that it trumpets its skillful crafting and masterful narrative.

In the years separating the publication of her two novels, Law-Yone settled in Washington D.C., where she is a columnist/book reviewer for the *Washington Post*. Her reviews, which often deal with works that directly engage the same themes as her own writing, are informed and articulate, and demonstrate the author's awareness and championing of a diverse population of authors. Wendy Law-Yone represents one of the faces and voices of the new global literature.



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## Selected Bibliography

### Works by the author

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