



# AAP Interview: Jane Trenka

*Jane Jeong Trenka has received fellowships from The Jerome Foundation, the Blacklock Nature Sanctuary, the Minnesota State Arts Board, the Loft Literary Center, and SASE: The Write Place. Cited by the independent Minnesota newspaper City Pages as “Best Book by a Local Author,” and by the Minnesota Humanities Commission for a “New Voice” commendation, *The Language of Blood* received the Minnesota Book Award for “Autobiography/Memoir” and was a Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers selection. She joined us recently for an interview.*

Interview by:  
Bryan Thao Worra  
of the Asian  
American Press

**Bryan Thao Worra (BTW): What are you working on right now?**

Jane Jeong Trenka (JT): I am working on a new book of memoir-type stuff, as well as an anthology of transracial adoptee work, which I am co-editing with Sun Yung Shin and Julia Sudbury.

**BTW: You've had a busy year. Which types of projects do you like working on the most?**

JT: I need to keep a mix of projects going to feed my soul. I definitely need to do the solo stuff, but I also love to work with smart, funny people. In fact, I'm looking forward to a collaborative project next weekend, which will consist of the development and taste-testing of “Cocktail Recipes with an Adoption Focus.” Someone already came up with a brilliant drink called “The Bitter Adoptee.”

**BTW: How long have you been writing?**

JT: I started seriously writing in 2001. So, I have been working on craft for almost three years. I support myself as a piano teacher.

**BTW: What do you like about writing in the Midwest? Do you feel that it shapes your writing differently from Asian American writers living on the coasts?**

JT: I've never lived on the coasts, and have never even been to LA, so I don't know exactly what I'm missing. However, I do know that I did not meet an adult of my own ethnic group until I graduated from college. I cannot imagine that happening to an Asian American living on one of the coasts.



# AAP Interview: Jane Trenka

JT (continued): I am currently writing about whiteness, and that's because I grew up in rural Minnesota in a white family. "Write what you know," right? I would probably not be embarked on the whiteness project if I had grown up on the coasts.

One of the funny things about Minnesota is its extraordinarily high Korean adoptee population. I have a terrific circle of friends in the Twin Cities--many of whom are adoptee writers and scholars--so I don't feel that I lack for community. The adoptee mafia understands my propensity for eating kimchi and tuna noodle casserole at the same meal--and everyone who comes to my house admires my jackalope.

**BTW: What are some of your favorite themes to work with?**

JT: I write a lot about language and the body--not because they are my favorite themes--but because I am bothered by them and they won't leave me alone.

**BTW: What has been your biggest challenge as a writer?**

JT: My subject matter has a tendency to overshadow my actual writing. There is a freak-show quality about my life that is very interesting to people, so I end up talking about my life more than my craft in public. I also end up doing a lot of listening; I've heard so many tragic adoption stories from complete strangers since the release of *Language of Blood*. I am by nature exceedingly introverted, so being in public takes a lot of energy for me. Right now I'm trying to find a way to balance my public speaking with the seclusion that I need to write.

**BTW: What got you started in writing?**

JT: When I was growing up, my next-door neighbor had a typewriter, and I loved to go and visit it. It had a nice metal/inky smell. So my neighbor bought me my own Disney toy typewriter that really worked. It had a wheel on it that you could spin around, and it would stamp out one letter at a time. Naturally, I started writing "News Around the World," the complete newspaper including all the late-breaking news from my house. I found out that you get praised for writing some things, and punished for writing others.



# AAP Interview: Jane Trenka

JT (continued): There were many incidents throughout my life when I would write something in a diary that a parent or boyfriend would read, and I would suffer the consequences of my thoughts. You would think that I would just stop writing, and I did many times, but I always returned to it. I am sort of compulsive about writing. A lot of that energy got channeled into my pianistic training.

When I was married and finally living in a safe, supportive environment, I began to do my creative writing again. That was during my Korean mother's final illness; I wrote to heal myself.

**BTW: Do you have a personal favorite piece out of all of your writing?**

JT: I am enamored with whatever I'm writing at the moment.

**BTW: How would you describe your writing process?**

JT: I have a physical sensation about the shape of things--how they want to be--and I will often stand in the corner of my office and conduct the words as one would conduct a piece of music. I also cry a lot, and that is the physical manifestation of the words leaving my body. I have terrible luck working in coffee shops--people look at me very strangely.

**BTW: What do you look for most in your own writing?**

JT: I look for things that please me. If I am pleased, it stays. If I am bored, it goes. After that, I ask myself if my dental hygienist would "get it." I desperately want to communicate.

**BTW: Has your family been supportive of your writing?**

JT: My Korean family and adopted sister have been 100% supportive. My American parents have not read my book.

**BTW: Who are some of your favorite writers?**

JT: Sun Yung Shin, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, William Faulkner, Louise Bogan, Li-Young Lee, Cornel West, Wislawa Szymborska, Czeslaw Milosz, Patricia Hampl, Jorie Graham, Toni Morrison, Elizabeth Bishop-- not necessarily in that order.



# AAP Interview: Jane Trenka

**BTW: What do you think readers would be surprised to know about you?**

JT: I'm more well-adjusted and better behaved than people expect me to be; I don't have multiple heads, and I don't breathe fire. People are also surprised that I am not gifted with languages in the way they expect a writer should be; my GRE verbal score is below the University of Minnesota's MFA entrance requirement, and I have a horrible time with "foreign" languages.

**BTW: You deal with a lot of intense ideas and experiences in your book. How did you sort them out when you first began to set them down?**

JT: I didn't worry about making order out of things when I first started writing, because I had no intentions of writing a book. I was just writing whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted. When I had about sixty pages, I printed them out and stuck them in a three-ring binder, and I thought, "Hey, that kind of looks like a book." When I had about 200 pages and I knew it was going to be a book, I printed out my entire manuscript in miniature--eight pages on one sheet of paper--and then I cut the pages into sheets the size of playing cards. Then I moved my pages around until they fit together. It was sort of like quilting. Maybe a little like making like visual art.

**BTW: Were publishers supportive of your project when you first began to approach them about it?**

JT: Actually, my publisher approached me about my manuscript. I sent it the whole thing to them via email in a huge-ass Word attachment the day before I left to go on my honeymoon in Portugal. When I came back, they made an offer. So, I have been very lucky, and very supported.

**BTW: Will we ever see *Language of Blood*, the movie?**

JT: Despite my sister's wish to be played by Tia Carerre, probably not.

**BTW: What other hobbies are you involved in?**

JT: I like cooking and gardening. I am really not interested in plants unless I can eat them, so my garden is almost entirely edible. I'm growing vegetables, herbs, medicinal flowers, and just a few species of decorative flowers that my American mom used to grow.



# AAP Interview: Jane Trenka

**BTW: Does it really feel better, now that you've written your experiences down? Would you encourage other adoptees to do it?**

JT: The world keeps changing, and I keep changing, and I continue to write because writing makes me feel better. When we were in the stages of proofing the galleys, I thought that maybe *The Language of Blood* was going to be the first and the last book out of me. But after I passed through the "empty and fucked out" stage, as Hemingway calls it, I still had other stuff to write about. I think I'll always have other stuff to write about, because there is always going to be something that bothers me, something that I have to figure out. So, to answer your question, "yes and no." As for other adoptees--and just anyone in general--I would encourage them to do whatever pleases them, whatever keeps them alive. Writing is just one thing that can help us to survive our subject matter.

**BTW: Have you noticed any particular trends in the writing of other adoptees?**

JT: We are by nature a diasporic community, and on the individual level, transracial adoption is fundamentally an isolating experience. However, thanks to the internet, there is a lot of adoptee-authored research and writing circulating presently. Adoptee culture is much different than even ten years ago because of the internet; we are finally able to access each other and each other's work. I'm seeing a lot of cross-fertilization and alliances that transgress ethnic and national boundaries. In particular, I'm seeing some incredible academic work; this is so important because any positive changes in adoption must be approached from a variety of ways, and one of the most important ways we can do that is through academia.

Unfortunately, there is a climate in the adoption community right now where it is acceptable for adoptees to be sad--adoptive parents have written books that approve and expect that--but it is not yet acceptable to be an adoptee who is smart and intellectually armed. And I mean armed--with research, historical contexts, statistics, and so forth. There are some very courageous adoptees out there who are writing in ways that turn the master narrative about adoption on its head. I am very invested in supporting these other writers, many of whom I am deeply privileged to be able to call my friends.

**BTW: Do you think there is an Asian American aesthetic?**

JT: Are you trying to get Frank Chin to kick my ass?



# AAP Interview: Jane Trenka

**BTW: What do you hope your audiences will take away with them after reading your work?**

JT: I am very conscious that my audience is largely comprised of white adoptive parents. I hope that they come away from *The Language of Blood* with a lot of curiosity about the ethics of international adoption. I also hope that they will also be motivated to interrogate their own whiteness and what their whiteness means in the structures of their own family, their country, and the world.

As for Asian Americans--I hope that my work will help to expand people's ideas of what an authentic Asian American experience can be. And I want Korean nationals to get something wholly different out of it, but that's too long to go into here.

**BTW: Do you have any advice for younger writers?**

JT: Do whatever it is that you need to do to get your work in the world done, and, as Deborah Keenan says, "If your work as a writer makes you less of a human being, stop immediately."