



AAP Interview: Karen An-hwei Lee

*Karen An-hwei Lee lives and teaches on the West Coast. A regular contributor to literary journals, she has completed several novels and poetry collections. Her work has won numerous university awards, fellowships, and residencies, including a fellowship from the Yoshiko Uchida Foundation. She holds an M.F.A. in creative writing and a Ph.D. in literature. Sarabande Books recently released her collection, *In Media Res*, “an investigation into how God hides in language,” and an “etude on blindness and enlightenment.” Asian American Press caught up with her recently to discuss her work.*

Interview by:
Bryan Thao Worra
of the Asian
American Press

Asian American Press (AAP): How did you get involved in writing in the first place?

Karen An-hwei Lee (KL): As a child in first grade, I had a wonderful teacher who taught how to design, illustrate, and write chapbooks. We made autumn leaf books, butterfly books, and pumpkin seed books, to name a few. I've been writing ever since.

AAP: What made you choose this ("a primer of experience / in approximate / alphabetical order") as your subject?

KL: To tell the truth, subjects find me more often than I find them. I noticed that my accumulating notes resembled an acrostic psalm, so I left them in that form. A number of Biblical psalms are acrostics, each section beginning with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The book turned out to have more primer-like qualities than psalmic qualities, however, sort of an elemental series of spaces and objects in a stream of life, so I subtitled it “a primer of experience.”

AAP: Is there any place that readers can go to find more examples of your work?

KL: Swan Scythe Press published *God's One Hundred Promises*, a sequence of linked prose poems, a couple years ago. An excerpt is available to read at Swan Scythe's website.

AAP: What are some of your future follow-up projects?

KL: I am working on a book of prose poems exploring the poetry / prose distinction. The book also explores my relationship to Asia and the word as flesh.



AAP Interview: Karen An-hwei Lee

AAP: What was your biggest worry as you were putting *In Medias Res* together?

KL: That self would eclipse spirit.

AAP: What do you hope that your readers will walk away with after reading *In Medias Res*?

KL: Romans 6:23: “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord”

AAP: What’s the most constructive feedback you received while composing *In Medias Res*?

KL: I currently receive no outside feedback while composing. I find this method works best.

AAP: *In Medias Res* draws from many cultural and literary influences. Did those connections just appear naturally to you, or did it take deep probing and contemplation to discover them?

KL: As each book comes into existence, it creates its own filter for experience comprised of various threads, images, and ideas. Perceiving and understanding the filter takes time, so disciplined prayer, reading, note-taking, and contemplation are necessary for me before the finished work carries a sense of effortlessness. Effortlessness, that is, achieved through focused practice and discipline. The process can be likened to prayer. A praying intercessor must be grounded in the Word before he or she can hear the Spirit of God without interference.

AAP: Who are your favorite writers?

KL: Augustine, Edmond Jabes, and Theresa Cha are writers I return to, in addition to the spirit-breathed Bible. In the past I’ve also enjoyed reading a number of Marguerites . . . Marguerite Young, Marguerite Duras, Marguerite Yourcenar.

AAP: What’s been the best compliment you’ve received about your writing?

KL: That is has more spirit than self.



AAP Interview: Karen An-hwei Lee

AAP: Do you have any advice for younger writers?

KL: I like Elie Wiesel's advice: "Write only if you cannot live without writing. Write only what you alone can write."