



# AAP Interview: Adrienne Su

*Born in 1967 in Atlanta and raised there, Adrienne Su attended Harvard University and the University of Virginia, where her mentors were Rita Dove, Gregory Orr, and Charles Wright. In 1995 she was the first Ralph Samuel Poetry Fellow at Dartmouth College, and later she held residencies at Yaddo and MacDowell. She spent three winters in Provincetown, Massachusetts (one of them on a fellowship from the Fine Arts Work Center) and several years as a writer and editor in New York City, where she briefly competed in slams at the Nuyorican Poets Cafe, including one season with the national team. Her first book of poetry, Middle Kingdom, was printed in 1997 by Alice James Books. She now teaches English and creative writing at Dickinson College in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, where she lives with her husband and daughter. Asian American Press had a chance to interview her recently via e-mail.*

Interview by:  
Bryan Thao Worra  
of the Asian  
American Press

**Asian American Press (AAP): Do you have any major upcoming projects?**

SU: I'm just working on poems, one at a time. Thinking about them as part of a collection tends to confuse and distract me as I write. It's more comfortable, and free for me to inhabit each poem as its own little world. So I wouldn't call my project "major."

**AAP: How did you become a poet?**

SU: I started writing as soon as I could form a sentence on paper, and wrote stories and poems, using an old manual typewriter. For much of my youth I was sure I'd write fiction, but I became more and more comfortable with poetry, and less so with fiction.

**AAP: When did you decide you were ready to seek out publication and recognition as a professional poet?**

SU: Too early, really. I started sending work out when I was in high school. The real beginning was probably shortly after college. By then I knew not to take rejection notes personally.



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**AAP: Who have been some of your favorite writers?**

SU: This is a hard question for me. There are so many that I tend to leave out some of the writers I like best. I'll name some poets, though: Elizabeth Bishop, Rita Dove, Eavan Boland, Donald Justice, Sylvia Plath, Gerard Manley Hopkins, William Carlos Williams, and Virgil, the poet through whom I learned about meter, in Latin class.

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

SU: In the initial draft, it's all over the place -- I try to find a balance between writing everything down that comes to mind and being too careful. If I write down everything, I start to make to-do lists and opinion pieces; there needs to be some sense of constraint. If I'm too careful, I edit too much and cut off something interesting and unexpected. Later, in the revision stage, I am deliberate. I revise a lot, and generally tuck things away for a good while, then revise them again, before considering them finished.

**AAP: What themes and ideas are particularly interesting to you in your writing these days?**

SU: Motherhood. Parenthood. My husband and I have a 20-month-old daughter who has transformed our existence. The challenge here, I think, is to be truthful without being sentimental, because you're welcoming a lot of teddy bears and yellow duckies into your life, and you haven't walked through this particular field of cliches before.

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

SU: Staying interesting, or keeping faith that I can write something that will interest people, even as my own experience and knowledge seem more and more ordinary.



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**AAP: Do you feel being Asian American has had any effect on how your work is read and received by critics and the community, including other poets?**

SU: Yes. It's one more aspect of who I am -- in addition to being of my generation, being American, being female, etc. -- that unavoidably shapes people's expectations. Like all of those, it has its advantages and disadvantages. An advantage is that I may have found some extra readers, people who were looking for "Asian-American poetry" and stumbled across my work. A disadvantage is a corollary of that: I'd like my work to be read as American poetry (good or bad), and not necessarily as Asian-American poetry.

**AAP: How do you find time to write, especially when raising a family?**

SU: It's difficult. It's probably poetry itself that has made me aware of how brief childhood is, and life, too; the events of September 11 sharpened that awareness. So I'm acutely conscious of the time I spend apart from my child. I've cut out lots of things that can wait: movies, coffee breaks, leisurely dinners, puttering around when she's asleep. I almost never watch TV. And I try to make the mundane into the stuff of poetry, rather than trying to reach for something ethereal when writing.

**AAP: Your work touches on many aspects of the Asian American experience. Are there any considerations you make to keep your writing accessible to both Asian and non-Asian audiences?**

SU: Accessibility is always a concern when I write; I don't like to lock people, Asian or non-Asian, out of a poem. I try not to make too many obscure Asian references -- partially because my own knowledge of Asia is limited and was acquired in school.

**AAP: Should questions of accessibility even be a consideration for Asian American writers?**

SU: If we're writing for everyone, then I believe so. At the same time, we have to be true to ourselves. It's possible to strike a balance. One doesn't have to explain every single reference for the reader to get the idea.



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**AAP: You've frequently interjected humor into your poetry, often surprising first-time readers. What are your thoughts on the relationship of humor to poetry?**

SU: Humor belongs in poetry, just as it belongs in life. I love to read poets who have a sense of humor. Wislawa Szymborska comes to mind. So do Thomas Lux, Alan Dugan, and Billy Collins. And at a poetry reading, it's great to be part of an audience that isn't afraid to laugh -- there's a sense of communion with the poet that can't be duplicated by solitary reading.

**AAP: What advice would you give to new writers?**

SU: Read the old and new, find mentors, find friends who read. And don't be afraid to edit your own work, fiercely.