



AAP Interview: Sherry Quan Lee

Minnesota teacher and writer Sherry Quan Lee has been an eclectic and significant figure in the Asian American writers scene in the Midwest, and has worked with many of the writers here at different stages in their careers. She had volunteered her time with a number of Asian American writing groups and arts movements, including Asian American Renaissance, which printed her popular book, Chinese Blackbird. She is part of the distinctive Split Rock Arts Program at the College of Continuing Education at the University of Minnesota and continues to be active in the community. 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?

Sherry Quan Lee (SQL): Writing was a way to penetrate isolation, silence, and eventually invisibility. It was/and is a passionate obsession. From second grade couplets to fifth grade rhyming quatrains, to free verse--and freedom, writing was everything missing or hidden or disguised. It became my identity. I paid attention to myself, created photographs with sentences, with paragraphs, with books. My poems became conversation, escaped the page and my world to become connected with the universe.

AAP: How has the response been to your book *Chinese Blackbird*?

SQL: *CHINESE BLACKBIRD* sold out in six months. The only bookstore it was sold at was Amazon Bookstore in Minneapolis where the publication reading was held. Most copies were sold at numerous readings. The last copies were sold to students in a Women's Studies class at the University of Minnesota--it was a required text.

Because AAR no longer had the staff to market *CHINESE BLACKBIRD*, there was a two year lull. Recently I received permission to reprint the book. Literature students at St. Catherine are used *CHINESE BLACKBIRD* as one of their required texts.

Also, I came up with the idea of: "Host an Author" Party. Someone who is looking to host a unique kind of party--can invite me to read, answer questions, facilitate a writing workshop, and give away autographed books! At the first party, seventeen guests participated--not all writers, which I encourage. In May, I will be the "author" at a party in Mankato, MN.



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

SQL: *Chinese Blackbird* is one of the books featured on foliobooks.com. Other published work is out-of-print.

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

SQL: I have been trying to write fiction with no success. My failure is evolving into creative nonfiction stories. Tentative title: *How to Write a Suicide Note To Save Your Life!* The book is part memoir, part the process of how that memoir was written; thus, my process and understanding of living and my process and understanding of writing.

AAP: Do you have any advice for younger writers?

SQL: Live passionately; write with passion. Know that YOUR work is important. Interact with other writers; share your writing.

AAP: What's the best compliment you've received about your work?

SQL: Perhaps the best compliment was from John Crawford, West End Press. Although he rejected my manuscript, then called *A WOMAN'S CYCLE*, he said: "Your mentors are all impressive influences and I can see evidence of their strengths in your poetry as well." He also said the manuscript "earned his respect." His words encouraged me to continue looking for a publisher.

AAP: What's your writing process like?

SQL: You will have to read *HOW TO WRITE A SUICIDE NOTE* when I'm finished writing it because as I continue to write, I continue to be blessed with answers. However, I can say my process is definitely related to my muse--my angels my Gods, my Aunt Grace.



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AAP: Who's on your bookshelf these days?

SQL: I'm glad you asked this question. I am reading books by Summer 2005 Split Rock Arts Program faculty including *BETWEEN GRASS AND SKY* by Linda Hasselstrom, *WHERE NO GODS CAME* by Sheila O'Connor, *TELL ME* by Kim Addonizio, *THE STONE OF LANGUAGE* by Anya Achtenberg, and *STAYING PUT MAKING A HOME IN A RESTLESS WORLD* by Scott Russell Sanders, just to name a few.

AAP: What's something that you don't think most people know about you?

SQL: My life is an open book, still, perhaps, people don't know how lonely I often am.