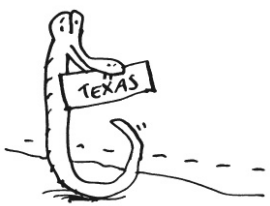
BRIEFLY NOTED

The Price of Politics, *by Bob Woodward (Simon & Schuster)*. "Let's not do this again," Barack Obama says toward the end of Woodward's account of the 2011 debt-ceiling negotiations, during which the United States came close to defaulting. In previous books, Woodward has restaged historical dramas played out in Washington offices, but here tax-cut and spending-cut numbers are thrown around with little sense of what's at stake. One learns about a call received in a McDonald's or about how the President was put on mute, but it is only at the end, in a cri de coeur from Timothy Geithner, that the global consequences of default become clear. Perhaps the familiarity of Woodward's method has begun to shape what his interlocutors tell him: recollected emotions often dovetail conveniently with talking points. Much regard is given to Eric Cantor's tender feelings; Paul Ryan is shocked by Obama's "demagoguery." Woodward, who has here the elements of a devastating study of Washingtonian pettiness, has instead written a book that in many ways exemplifies it.

Henry Cowell, *by Joel Sachs (Oxford)*. Cowell (1897-1965) was a unique musical figure, if not quite a great composer. Reared in near-poverty among free-thinking San Francisco bohemians, he made up in industriousness and novelty what he lacked in stylistic individuality. Cowell's exploits at the piano—slamming out tone clusters with his forearms, strumming the instrument's strings—won the admiration of Berg and Bartók and the devotion of his protégés John Cage and Lou Harrison. He was also a generous colleague, working tirelessly to advance new music, despite the complications presented by the grand ambitions of Copland or the mendacity of Varèse. (Even four years in San Quentin, after he pleaded guilty to a morals charge, could not crush his spirit.) Sachs's deep knowledge of Cowell's music, and his sensitive insight into the composer's odd but enduring marriage, enlivens a portrait of a man who, as much as Charles Ives or Louis Armstrong, made modern American music a reality.



The Collective, *by Don Lee (Norton)*. In the opening pages of Lee's smart, subdued third novel, Eric Cho, a Korean-American college freshman, is accused by a friend of being a "banana"—yellow on the outside, white on the inside. The accuser, Joshua Yoon, is Korean-American, too—a budding writer, self-styled identity-politics expert, and supreme narcissist. Joshua is obsessed with race, and acutely critical of mainstream representations of Asians, which he dubs "orientalist masturbatory fantasy figures." After graduation, he organizes an artists' collective, an "Asian version of Bloomsbury," hoping to "deform and reform the stereotypes"—a project that has unexpected consequences. Lee, a third-generation Korean-American, is obviously familiar with the complexity of identity fixation, and his characters ultimately discover the danger of becoming martyrs to a cause.

No Animals We Could Name, *by Ted Sanders (Graywolf)*. Odd and audacious creatures populate this sometimes experimental début short-story collection. Sanders's world is one in which people find themselves in the company of oversized halibuts, lions made of chicken bones and bedsheets, and sausage links masquerading as tailless lizards. Some of the animals are real; others are conjured up by characters, often as an outlet for impulses of anguish and desperation that they cannot otherwise express. The fanciful menagerie is given substance by the beauty of Sanders's descriptions: we see "water fight itself down the drain"; curtains curl "like the toes of waves"; teeth become "torn bits of paper" capable of "thinning the dark."

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The Boston Globe Books

BOOK REVIEW

‘The Collective’ by Don Lee

By John Freeman | JULY 22, 2012

MELISSA FROST

Lee’s “The Collective” tracks the arc of three Asian Americans into university and then post-graduate life.

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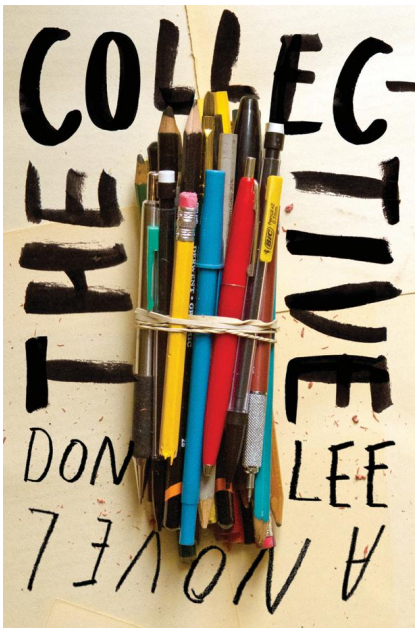
In the 1980s and 1990s, all around America, you could hear jackhammering in English departments. No one read a book without a complete tool kit of theory. You didn’t read Shakespeare, say. You read about the performance of gender in Shakespeare. Students strapped on their theory and chipped and chiseled at the

text like a bunch of deranged sculpters. And then stood back and admired what a wreckage they could make of some old block of stone.

For a white male student like me, this was largely a mercenary art, with very little at stake except eventually acknowledging that the power structures that had privileged my kind were, not surprisingly, reflected in works of art. I didn't need theory to teach me empathy, to help me understand the world's cruelty. The books themselves did that just fine.

But for students of color — as in any color but white — this was at once an exhilarating and enormously stressful time. All the supporting apparatuses of campus life encouraged them to use the same tools they'd acquired in literature classes on their own selves; in essence, to jackhammer within. The word interrogate was very popular.



THE COLLECTIVE

Author: Don Lee

Publisher: Norton

Number of pages: 314 pp.

Book price: $25.95

At last we have a kind of campus novel about this contentious period of academe, Don Lee's "The Collective." It is a hilarious and winning story, smoothly told, even if it occasionally relies on some familiar character types to propel its story into motion.

Set at Macalester College and in Boston, it tracks the arc of three Asian Americans into university and then post-graduate life, where they take different approaches to continuing the exploration of identity they collectively began in classrooms.

Our guide to this tale is Eric Cho who, as the novel begins, learns that one of his closest university friends, and former roommate, Joshua Yoon, has been killed in a one-car accident on a road near Boston. Yoon left behind a suicide's clean slate: wills and belongings carefully sorted, his manuscripts burned. Cho is devastated.

This bit of prologue ought to give "The Collective" a kind of gloomy menace, but the book does a quick about-face. Lee writes such clear-as-lake-water prose that the stone of Yoon's death quickly drops to the bottom of the book and remains there.

Within pages we've spun back 20 years, and Cho and Yoon are meeting for the first time at Macalester. Cho is all nerves and studious good will; Yoon is a bad boy with a foul mouth.

On the first day of class, Yoon challenges Cho to find their fellow classmate, Jessica Tsai, attractive. "[Y]ou strictly vanilla? As in boarding-school shiksas . . . Ritz cracker chirp-chirp Marshas."

As it turns out Cho has always dated white women, a decision he hasn't interrogated until Joshua forces him to do so. And yet when Cho finally finds a girlfriend at Macalester she is, of course, white.

The section of the novel that describes Cho's first love affair is moving, and merciless. It is at once frankly erotic and mundane, the way college love-making can be. You know fairly soon that Cho is going to get dumped. Yoon, of course, is waiting for him when it's all over. "I've missed you bro," he says.

In moments like this, "The Collective" threads a perfect line between the theoretical dogfights of the classroom and the actual dogfight of experience. Half of what you learn in college, after all, is discovering what you don't already yet have experience to fully know. One of the pleasures of college life, and writing workshops, is the notion of there being safety in numbers, that if there is suffering to be done, it will be done collectively.

"The Collective" reveals what a fallacy this idea is, especially when experience

constantly has to be doubly refracted, as it is for Lee's characters: once against the theories that frame cultural identity, and then again through the filter of Asian American identity itself.

Lee's cast alone shows how difficult it is to even conceive of the latter existing. Cho is a third-generation from Mission Viejo, Calif.; Yoon is a first-generation orphan from Korea, raised by two Jewish professor intellectuals; and Jessica Tsai, the third of their triumvirate, who also winds up in Boston after graduation, a second-generation Taiwanese from upstate New York.

In the second half of the novel, the three of them move in to a house on Walker Street in Cambridge, and become hopelessly, dangerously intertwined. Lee writes perceptively and well about the bargains working artists make with themselves to tame their ambitions. Cho begins working at a literary journal called Palaver, surely modeled upon Ploughshares, which Lee edited for nearly two decades. Slowly Cho's dreams of his own writing begin to be put on hold.

Yoon and Tsai, however, follow the genius route, the tortured-artist route, which means not giving up but allowing oneself freedoms in reward for fortitude. Yoon says and does whatever he wants, while Tsai becomes a kind of sexual provocateur. Eventually, all three of them — feeling frustrated and in need of something — decide to form an Asian-American artist collective.

At this point, the novel's plot has to work pretty hard to bring about a dramatic culmination to its above ground discussion of identity politics. Press conferences are held; lawyers engaged. Meanwhile, this book's plangent, and also celebratory undercurrent, flows on, whispering to the reader that the other collective it speaks of — friendship in youth — is equally unstable, and prone to collapse. The best parts of this keenly felt novel will remind you why.

John Freeman is the editor of Granta and the author of "The Tyranny of E-mail."

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Young, gifted, and Asian American

Amusing romp trails three college friends wrestling with race and role of the artist

By John Freeman

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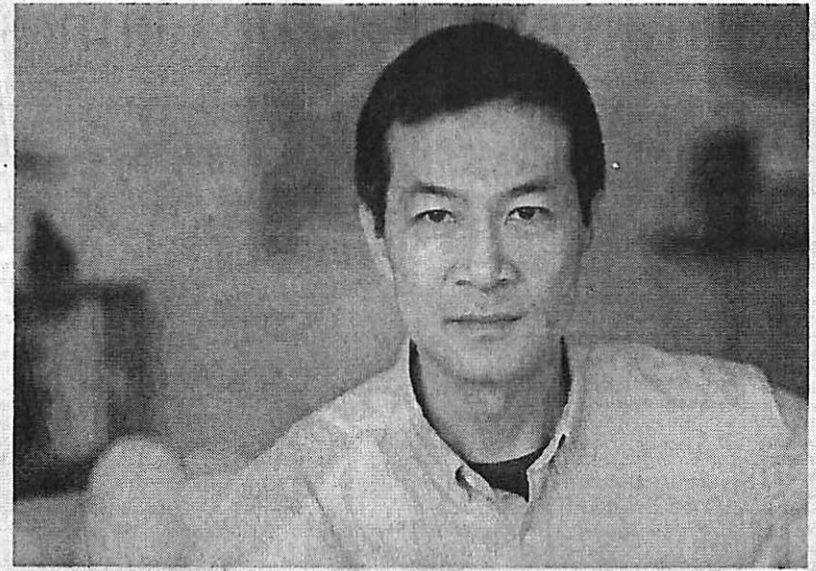

MELISSA FROST

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By Don Lee
Norton, 314 pp., $25.95

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The Christian Science Monitor

6 books you should resolve to read in 2012

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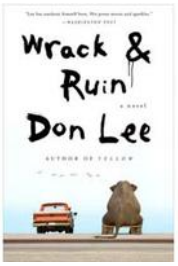
6 of the more intriguing books of early 2012

- Rachel Meier, Monitor contributor



Enlarge

Another of author Don Lee's novels, 'Wrack and Ruin'

6. 'The Collective' by Don Lee

With wit, tenacity, and compassion, "The Collective" explores the dream of becoming an artist and questions whether the reality is worth the sacrifice. Eric Cho, Jessica Tsai, and Joshua Yoon—two aspiring writers and a painter—meet in college in the late ‘80s. It is Joshua’s presence in their lives—enormous, brilliant, manipulative, and dangerous—that rallies them together. The novel’s present-day is years after the three have left college and recently after Joshua has committed suicide. "The Collective" brilliantly sorts through issues of friendship, intimacy, idealism, art, sacrifice, racism, and publicity. Don Lee is a phenomenal writer that you absolutely should know, and "The Collective" is a book you absolutely should read. Get two pages in and you’ll know I’m right.

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The Top 10 Things We Love This Week

The MUST LIST

1 BREAKING BAD

Last season ended with multiple shocking, ultra-violent bangs, and everybody's favorite meth dealer is still coping with the smoldering aftermath. Don't expect the fifth season to start slowly. *(AMC, premieres July 15, 10 p.m.)*

2 "UNDER THE WESTWAY," Blur The new single from these reunited Britpop heroes (who'll be performing at the Olympics' closing ceremony on Aug. 12) is a tender, heavenly paean to their beloved London.

3. THE COLLECTIVE, by Don Lee
A group of Asian-American artists led by the brilliant, charismatic, and downright obnoxious Joshua Yoon struggle to carve out their creative identities amid poverty, heartache, and blatant racism in Lee's provocative third novel.

4 WOODY AT 100, Woody Guthrie Loaded with essential recordings as well as lost material, the Smithsonian's three-disc set preserves the spirit of the late folk giant, who would have hit the century mark this week.

Illustration by JESSE LENZ

BREAKING BAD: FRANK OCKENFELS/AMC; ILLUSTRATION BACKGROUND: VETTA/GETTY IMAGES; BLUR: JON FURNISS/WIREIMAGE.COM; GUTHRIE: FRANK DRIGGS COLLECTION/GETTY IMAGES

The Collective

Don Lee

NOVEL

The passionate and infuriating young artists at the center of Lee's third novel spend an inordinate amount of time trying to define themselves. When they meet at Macalester College, writers Joshua Yoon and Eric Cho and painter Jessica Tsai have a better idea of what they're *not*: computer nerds, geishas, or, God forbid, Long Duk Dong. After graduation, the three friends form the Asian American Artists Collective (3AC), largely the work of Joshua, the brilliant and tortured radical of the group. Over the years, the 3AC battles infighting, censorship, and the brand of casual, can't-you-take-a-joke racism so often directed at Asian-Americans. Yes, Lee comes with an agenda—an important one—about ethnicity and art, but he also delivers a heartbreaking, sexy, and frequently funny story about fractured friendships. **A–** *—Stephan Lee*

QUICK TAKES

Are We Nearly There Yet?

Ben Hatch

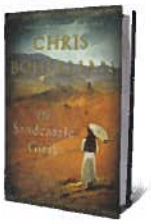
MEMOIR

"I'll turn guidebook writing into an art form," Hatch declares early on in his astute meta-travelogue. The weird thing is that he kind of does. Hatch wrote the Frommer's *England With Your Family* in 2010, but here he tells the real story. Cramped in a hatchback with his wife and toddlers, he hilariously navigates 8,000 miles' worth of doll surgeons, "smug farmers' sons," and a toothbrush incident not fit to reprint here. These droll episodes (printed next to his actual Frommer's drafts like a DVD commentary) are offset by moving memories of his late father and a touchingly frank look at his own parenting skills. **A–** *—Ray Rahman*

The Sandcastle Girls

Chris Bohjalian

NOVEL



The storytelling structure is precariously ornate in this ardent historical romance, grounded in a real-life tragedy known by too few, the Armenian genocide of 1915. Laura Petrosian, a contemporary popular novelist living in comfortable American suburbia, discovers how her Bostonian grandmother and Armenian grandfather fell in love during the carnage. Drawing for the first time on his own heritage, Bohjalian (*Midwives*)—the grandson of Armenian survivors—pours passion, pride, and sadness into his tale of ethnic destruction and endurance. **B+** *—Lisa Schwarzbaum*

The Chart

HARDCOVER BEST-SELLERS

1 Gone Girl

Bolstered by excellent reviews and word of mouth, Gillian Flynn's third psychological thriller has become her first book to hit the top of the chart.

FICTION TOP 10

		WEEKS ON LIST
1	**GONE GIRL** Gillian Flynn	4
2	**WICKED BUSINESS** Janet Evanovich	2
3	**BLOODLINE** James Rollins	1
4	**SUMMERLAND** Elin Hilderbrand	1
5	**CALICO JOE** John Grisham	12
6	**THE AGE OF MIRACLES** Karen Thompson Walker With a strong showing on the chart, this much-buzzed-about coming-of-age/disaster novel has lived up to its prepublication hype. Even with an irresistible concept—the rotation of the earth inexplicably begins to slow—Walker's debut is a rather unlikely best-seller. It's an apocalyptic tale that's meditative rather than explosive, and it's told from the perspective of an 11-year-old girl.	1
7	**THE STORM** Clive Cussler & Graham Brown	5
8	**MISSION TO PARIS** Alan Furst	3
9	**PORCH LIGHTS** Dorothea Benton Frank	3
10	**11TH HOUR** James Patterson & Maxine Paetro	8

NONFICTION TOP 10

		WEEKS ON LIST
1	**COWARDS** Glenn Beck	3
2	**WILD** Cheryl Strayed	15
3	**THE AMATEUR** Edward Klein	7
4	**KILLING LINCOLN** Bill O'Reilly with Martin Dugard	40
5	**THE SKINNY RULES** Bob Harper with Greg Critser	7
6	**AN AMERICAN SON** Marco Rubio	2
7	**IT WORKED FOR ME** Colin Powell with Tony Koltz	6
8	**LEADING CULTURE CHANGE IN GLOBAL ORGANIZATIONS** Daniel Denison, Robert Hooijberg, Nancy Lane & Colleen Lief	1
9	**WHAT REALLY HAPPENED: JOHN EDWARDS, OUR DAUGHTER, AND ME** Rielle Hunter More than 5,000 people have bought this tell-all by John Edwards' former mistress, published by boutique imprint BenBella Books. But given all the negative press, the major publishing houses probably aren't kicking themselves for passing.	1
10	**THE GREAT DESTROYER** David Limbaugh	4

SOURCE: Week ending July 1, 2012, powered by Nielsen BookScan © 2012 The Nielsen Company

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LEE MELISSA FROST

The Collective

by Don Lee • Hardcover, 352 pages

In this sometimes heartbreaking, sometimes hilarious novel, protagonist Eric Cho contemplates the life of Joshua Yoon, the Korean novelist with whom he, along with provocative visual artist Jessica Tsai, once formed the 3AC or Asian American Artists Collective. What may have led Joshua to commit suicide (or was it?) by running into the path of an oncoming car? Lee explores themes of identity he's contemplated in the past — the allure of the cultural bond, the bristle of the stereotype — but this time through the lens of the college novel. With the pump already primed by recent successes from Jeffrey Eugenides and Chad Harbach, I'm hoping that folks will be ready for this addition to the collegiate canon.

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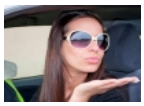
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FICTION: "The Collective," by Don Lee

Article by: SUN YUNG SHIN , Special to the Star Tribune Updated: August 11, 2012 - 11:32 AM

A tightly plotted tale that is part mystery, part coming-of-age and thoroughly American in its exploration of the uneasy role of the artist, set partly on the campus of St. Paul's Macalester College.

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At the center of Don Lee's latest novel is Joshua Yoon, a charismatic aspiring novelist who draws in -- and repels -- others with his intellectual bravado and black-sheep persona. A student at the idyllic Macalester College of the late 1980s, the contrarian Joshua rails against its "old bourgeois concept of togetherness ... [and] PC liberalism" while his new friend Eric Cho embraces its "intimacy."

Though they have much in common, Joshua has arrived from the East Coast and has a complicated background; Eric is from Southern California and has always been one to blend in. The animated dialectic between their cynicism and idealism propels the narrative forward as they fumble exuberantly through their first year of college -- a heady mix of girls, self-recognition and strained loyalties. Their friend Jessica Tsai, a remote beauty and gifted young painter, provides a somewhat wary feminine perspective.

The thread picks up again later in Boston, where they grapple with financial realities and artistic self-doubt. In a flurry of optimism and defiance, they form the Asian American Artists' Collective. But before long, a combustible chain of events tests their commitment to art, their ideals and one another.

Lively and suspenseful, this novel masterfully probes the high-stakes contest between integrity and belonging. Lee's sympathy for his deeply human characters will captivate any reader.

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Publisher: W.W. Norton, 314 pages, $25.95.
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NFL's first female official 'a little nervous' and plenty excited about preseason game | StarTribune.com (StarTribune.com)
Agriculture Department unveils new steps to penalize food stamp abusers, ensure eligibility (Politics)
Susan G. Komen for the Cure president leaving, founder moving into new role in latest shakeup

From Around the Web sponsored links
Grilled Chicken Dinner to Die For (Quick Dish)
Buffett Signals Tough Times Ahead (Money Morning)
Bed Bugs Are Now In USA: Outbreak has happened in the US. Find out the simple way to defend yourself now. (Sciences Daily)
The Books You Need to Read (Reader's Digest)
Trio turns Elf on the Shelf into fast-growing business (Biz Journals)
If This Dancer's Amigas Could See Her Now (The

TIME OUT NEW YORK

Books

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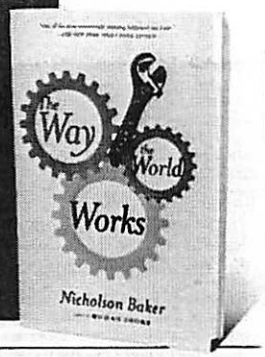


The Way the World Works

★★★★½

By Nicholson Baker.
Simon & Schuster, $25.

Nicholson Baker's extensive, unorthodox collection of books ranges from novels filled with idle thoughts of homely pleasures (*The Mezzanine*), to nonfictional polemics that are usually devoted to lost causes (*Double Fold*) and kaleidoscopic sex fantasies set in wildly imaginative playlands (*House of Holes*). In his new collection of previously published essays, the author's curiosity returns to the intimate and the personal.

Organized into five sections with headings including "Reading" and "Technology," Baker's obsessive first-person focus is brought to bear on the minutiae of everyday life. In "How I Met My Wife," a piece so private as to make the reader feel almost like an intruder, he remembers every detail of the portentous encounter, down to the "ticking sound" of his bicycle's "slowly revolving tire." Later in the collection, Baker explains exactly how to write while wearing earplugs. In "Sunday at the Dump," he lists each item left for collection in South Berwick, Maine's "swap shop"—toasters, an infant's car seat, a textbook of surgery—before landing on the quiet, incandescent reflection: "Maybe it's the clearness of the bags that makes the dump seem like a place of confidences—everyone can see just what everyone doesn't want."

Such microscopy avoids triviality thanks to Baker's unshakable (though often futile) impulse to preserve—both in essays that demonstrate an archivist's interest in how we record memory and history, and in those that relish and animate the transitory and supposedly familiar. The self-imposed restrictions on the author's world become a kind of productive constraint, allowing Baker to look at the artifacts of quotidian reality from odd, fresh angles. As *The Way the World Works* generously demonstrates, it's only when the ordinary is thus honored that it can glow with such significance.
—*Alice Whitwham*

The Collective

★★★★☆

By Don Lee.
W.W. Norton & Company, $26.

Don Lee's third novel traces the trajectory of three Asian-American friends who meet in college and pursue lives in the arts, together and apart, in the ensuing decade. The friendship among narrator Eric Cho, sirenlike visual artist Jessica Tsai, and the acerbic and troubled writer Joshua Yoon is complex and frequently fraught. When a confluence of circumstances finds the three cohabiting in a Cambridge, Massachusetts, household during the late 1990s, the intensity is ratcheted to nearly unbearable heights, abetted always by the manipulative presence of Joshua, whose determination to read racial undertones into every manner of personal and professional interaction is at once noble, self-serving and vaguely paranoid.

Among an ensemble of colorful characters, Joshua is the novel's most indelible creation. His is the sort of special talent and negative charisma around which a great deal of activity is frequently generated, and eventually the three main characters find themselves founders of a thriving group of young Asian-American artists called the Collective. Their ambition is to upend common perceptions of Asian-Americans through manifesto-driven art, and for a time it seems they might succeed in realizing their lofty aims.

What transpires is by turns comic and tragic, and in many ways *The Collective* turns out to be less a treatise on ethnic identity than a rumination on success and failure, idealism and pragmatism. Lee is a fine prose stylist who shares something of Philip Roth's talent for digressing into tangential episodes without ever halting the momentum of his narrative. Here, he credibly addresses the political and social concerns of a specific demographic, while also rendering a work that will feel relatable to nearly everyone who reads it. His characters would be proud.—*Timothy Bracy*

Listings

If you want to be listed
Submit information by e-mail (books@timeoutny.com) to **Matthew Love**. Include details, dates, times, address of venue with cross streets, nearest subways, contact information and admission price, if any. **Deadline is 10am Monday, ten days before publication date.** Incomplete submissions will not be included, and listings information will not be accepted over the phone.

Listings are chosen at the discretion of the editors. *TONY* does not accept compensation of any kind in exchange for listing events or venues.

* Recommended or notable
¢ Cheap

Thursday 23

*¢ **The Moth StorySLAM!** *Housing Works Bookstore Cafe, 126 Crosby St between E Houston and Prince Sts (212-334-3324, housingworksbookstore.org). 7pm; $8.* Ten stories. Three teams of judges. One winner. The outrageously (and deservedly) popular spontaneous reading series pits local scribes against one another, challenging them to come up with an impressive work based on a specific theme.

*¢ **The Soundtrack Series** *La Poisson Rouge, 158 Bleecker St at Thompson St (212-505-3474, lepoissonrouge.com). Subway: A, C, E, B, D, F, M to W 4th St. 7pm; $5.* In self-proclaimed music nerd Dana Rossi's monthly show, writers and performers of all kinds tell stories they associate with particular pieces of pop music. And no, they're not all about making out to Massive Attack. Tonight's reminiscing guests include Isaac Butler, Andrew Linderman, Leslie Goshko and Eric Lindley.

Friday 24

*¢ **All-Star Storytellers Night** *Le Poisson Rouge, 158 Bleecker St at Thompson St (212-505-3474, lepoissonrouge.com). Subway: A, C, E, B, D, F, M to W 4th St. 7pm; $10.* The Inspired Word performance series welcomes host Aimee Herman and a number of great storytellers, including Dave Hill, Giulia Rozzi and Robin Gelfenbien, to get personal. Interested audience members may be picked for one of three available five-minute slots.

Friday Night Poetry Slam *Nuyorican Poets Cafe, 236 E 3rd St between Aves B and C (212-505-8183, nuyorican.org). Subway: F to Lower East Side–Second Ave. 10pm; $20.* Performing poets make things lively at this weekly spoken-word event hosted by Mahogany Browne. They spit their best verses onstage in hopes of charming the crowd, winning over the judges and returning to compete another day.

Saturday 25

¢ **Urbintel's Verses** *Nuyorican Poets Cafe, 236 E 3rd St between Aves B and C (212-505-8183, nuyorican.org). Subway: F to Lower East Side–Second Ave. 9:30pm; $10.* Production company Urbintel, which tours spoken-word and street-theater events all over the country, welcomes poets from across the city to this series.

Sunday 26

FREE **Wodehouse Book Group: Leave It to Psmith** *WORD, 126 Franklin St at Milton St, Greenpoint, Brooklyn (718-383-0096, wordbrooklyn.com). Subway: G to Greenpoint Ave. 3pm.* Join a gathering of P.G. Wodehouse fans as they devour and discuss a new edition of this tale of Ronald Psmith and Blandings Castle.

Monday 27

* FREE **Words by the Water** *East River State Park, 90 Kent Ave at North 8th St, Williamsburg, Brooklyn (718-383-0096, wordbrooklyn.com). Subway: L to Bedford Ave. 7pm.* Taking a cue from Brooklyn Bridge Park's seasonal series, WORD curates its own outdoor readings, featuring several great local publishers. Tonight, online lit journal Electric Literature welcomes writers Marie-Helene Bertino and Fiona Maazel.

Tuesday 28

¢ **BoogWork** *Sidewalk Café, 94 Ave A at 6th St (212-473-7373, boogcity.com). Subway: F to Lower East Side–Second Ave; 6 to Astor Pl. 6:30pm; suggested donation $5.* Small East Village poetry press Boog City presents this series, which features music, readings from two poets and a workshop with one of those poets. Tonight's guests are David Kirschenbaum, Sean Cole and musicians Clinical Trials.

FREE **Levitate the Primate** *McNally Jackson Books, 52 Prince St between Lafayette and Mulberry Sts (212-274-1160, mcnallyjackson.com). Subway: N, R to Prince St. 7pm.* Critical blog and magazine *The New Inquiry* brings local writer Michael Thomsen—who has written for Slate, *The Believer* and many other publications—to talk about *Levitate the Primate*, his new collection of sex-centered essays.

FREE **Word for Word Poetry** *Bryant Park Reading Room, W 42nd St between Fifth and Sixth Aves (212-768-4242, bryantpark.org). Subway: B, D, F, M to 42nd St–Bryant Park; 7 to Fifth Ave. 7pm.* This series—a companion to the weekly daytime prose events of the same name—features a number of poets each night who are often connected via their publisher. Tonight's reading, which focuses on visual poetry, brings Eduardo Corral, Sharon Dolin, Dean Kostos and Michael T. Young.

Wednesday 29

FREE **Greenlight Poetry Salon** *Greenlight Bookstore, 686 Fulton St at South Portland Ave, Fort Greene, Brooklyn (718-246-0200, greenlightbookstore.com). Subway: B, D, N, Q, R, 2, 3, 4, 5 to Atlantic Ave–Pacific St; C to Lafayette Ave; G to Fulton St. 7:30pm.* Poet and Greenlight employee Angel Nafis curates this quarterly reading series, which brings together local and national verse writers.

FREE **Jonathan Kozol** *Barnes & Noble Union Square, 33 E 17th St between Broadway and Park Ave South (212-253-0810, bn.com). Subway: L, N, Q, R, 4, 5, 6 to 14th St–Union Sq. 7pm.* In his new *Fire in the Ashes*, public-education critic and National Book Award winner Jonathan Kozol returns to the same subject matter (and subjects) that he engaged in with previous titles *Rachel and Her Children* and *Amazing Grace*. The new book continues to explore what happens to American children who are born into poverty.

* FREE **Victor LaValle** *BookCourt, 163 Court St between Dean and Pacific Sts, Cobble Hill, Brooklyn (718-875-3677, bookcourt.com). Subway: F, G to Bergen St; R to Court St; 2, 3, 4, 5 to Borough Hall. 7pm.* Novelist and short-story writer Victor LaValle (*Big Machine, Slapboxing with Jesus*) returns with a new tale of horror, *The Devil in Silver*. It's a claustrophobic story of mental patients being hunted by a monster in their hospital.

FREE **John Reed in conversation with Eric Banks** *McNally Jackson Books, 52 Prince St between Lafayette and Mulberry Sts (212-274-1160, mcnallyjackson.com). Subway: N, R to Prince St. 7pm.* Celebrating the ten-year anniversary of *Snowball's Chance*, his take on Orwell's *Animal Farm*, novelist and *Brooklyn Rail* editor John Reed sits to talk with critic Eric Banks. In the story, Snowball the pig looks to implement

assistant, Jennifer Meli, a PhD in Italian literature with whom he eventually becomes intimate, and an epiphany one night on the Brooklyn docks helps him reach enlightenment. A "spiritual mishmash," in the words of the author, this account of a Buddhist priest's journey through life sheds light on cultural differences and finding acceptance. But fans of Morais' sensual debut, *The Hundred-Foot Journey* (2010), may find this pales in comparison. —*Michele Leber*

The Buffalo Hunter.
By Peter Straub.
July 2012. 156p. Cemetery Dance, $19.99 (9781587672361).

In the wake of a thirty-fifth birthday too well celebrated, Bob Bunting discovers a penchant for baby bottles. He's been using one for awhile, anyway, to avoid messy spills when he ends the day by curling up in bed with an oft-read western or mystery and a cocktail. That's instead of dating Veronica, the Swiss bombshell he's been heavy-dating, as far as his parents and only work friend know, or otherwise living the life his wardrobe of stylish suits implies. When he starts using his new bottles, he also starts literally getting into a book's setting and predicaments, though characters and developments differ from what he remembers. A real-life date, worried calls from his father about his mother's health, thorough cleaning and redecoration of his apartment, branching out from Luke Short and Raymond Chandler to *Anna Karenina*, and many more baby bottles figure into Straub's masterly novella—written 20-plus years ago but scarcely betraying its age—whose trajectory is inevitable but not that predictable. —*Ray Olson*

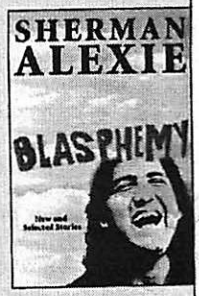
The Care and Handling of Roses with Thorns.
By Margaret Dilloway.
Aug. 2012. 368p. Putnam, $25.95 (9780399157752).

A private-school biology teacher, Gal Garner is known for her prickly personality. Her few friends have learned to cope with her candid outbursts, while school officials find her stubborn intractability hard to condone. To her students, she is one of the toughest taskmasters on the faculty. Yet at home in her rose garden, Gal blossoms into a sensitive, caring romantic as she tries to breed a fragrant species unlike anything on the market. Now in the end stages of kidney failure, Gal has to stick to a rigid dialysis schedule that leaves her little time for anything beyond her small world of school and greenhouse. So the sudden arrival of her teenage niece, Riley, whom she hasn't seen in years, not only throws her carefully constructed world into chaos; it forces both her and Riley to confront issues of estrangement and independence that have nearly torn their family apart. A richly textured diversion from standard treatments of family angst, Dilloway's (*How to Be an American Housewife*, 2010) new novel expresses a graceful understanding of the virtues of mercy. —*Carol Haggas*

HD **HIGH-DEMAND BACKSTORY:** As Alexie's creative adventurousness grows, so, too, does his popular and critical acclaim. Expect his latest to raise the bar still further.

☆ Blasphemy: New and Selected Stories.
By Sherman Alexie.
Oct. 2012. 480p. Grove, $27 (9780802120397).

A poet and fiction writer for adults of all ages, National Book Award winner Alexie is a virtuoso of the short story. His first two blazing collections, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993) and *The Toughest Indian in the World* (2000), established him as an essential American voice. Now, many books later, best-selling Alexie has created a substantial, big-hearted, and potent collection that combines an equal number of new and selected stories to profound effect. In these comfort-zone-destroying tales, including the masterpiece, "War Dances," his characters grapple with racism, damaging stereotypes, poverty, alcoholism, diabetes, and the tragic loss of languages and customs. Questions of authenticity and identity abound. In "The Search Engine," a Spokane college student tries to understand a poet raised by a white couple who no longer writes because he fears that he isn't "Indian enough." In the wrenching "Cry, Cry, Cry," two cousins take very different paths toward "being tribal," while in "Emigration," a man who left the reservation trusts that his daughters will keep their tribe's spirit alive. Alexie writes with arresting perception in praise of marriage, in mockery of hypocrisy, and with concern for endangered truths and imperiled nature. He is mischievously and mordantly funny, scathingly forthright, deeply and universally compassionate, and wholly magnetizing. This is a must-have collection. —*Donna Seaman*



The Chocolate Money.
By Ashley Prentice Norton.
Sept. 2012. 288p. Houghton/Mariner, paper, $15.95 (9780547840048).

Mommie Dearest has met her match in Babs Ballentyne, heiress to the Ballentyne chocolate fortune and so-called mother to only child Bettina. While Bettina may live in an "apparthouse" overlooking Lake Shore Drive in Chicago, she's the ultimate poor little rich girl. To put it nicely, her mother is a real piece of work, using her daughter as a pawn to satisfy her own interests and whims. Bettina is witness to an illicit affair between Babs and Mack, a married man who shows Bettina rare kindness. A few years after Mack dies in a car accident, Bettina enrolls in prep school Cardiss, where Mack's son, Cape, is a student. Bettina's single-minded sexual pursuit of Cape—as well as her chain-smoking habit and detachment from those around her—reeks of Babs, and readers will wonder if the apple hasn't fallen too far from the tree. Debut author Norton, the great-great-granddaughter of John D. Rockefeller, writes fearlessly, and the results are compelling. Reading this novel is like watching a train speed toward you, and you're paralyzed on the tracks. —*Ann Kelley*

YA/M: *Teens who like boarding-school stories—and who want to feel better about their own parents—will not be able to put this down. AK.*

The Collective.
By Don Lee.
July 2012. 320p. Norton, $25.95 (9780393083217).

Joshua Yoon, a thirtysomething writer who never quite made it, has committed suicide. Hearing of Joshua's death, Eric Cho reflects on their relationship and what could have driven Joshua to commit such an act. It was the late 1980s when Eric met Joshua and a beautiful Asian art student, Jessica, at a midwestern college. The three became inseparable and referred to themselves as the 3AC, or Asian Collective. For Joshua, race was always an issue. He constantly questioned whether Eric was "Asian enough" when Eric dated a white woman, and when a racist act was perpetrated against the 3AC, Joshua pushed for retribution. Over time, Joshua, with his big ideas, cocky attitude, and manipulative personality, became more radical, while the others mellowed. Yet when another racist act was committed against one of the 3AC years later, it became a defining moment for all. Lee smashes Asian stereotypes to pieces to present a provocative look at what it truly means to have one's identity tied to not just oneself but also an entire race. —*Carolyn Kubisz*

A Cupboard Full of Coats.
By Yvvette Edwards.
Aug. 2012. 272p. Amistad, paper, $14.99 (9780062183736).

Fourteen years after the tragic death of her mother, Jinx cannot reconcile her overwhelming sense of guilt and move on with her life. Her marriage has dissolved, her relationship with her young son is in shambles, and she hasn't learned to love since her mother's violent exit from this world at the hands of her lover. But when an unexpected visitor from the past returns, Jinx is forced to face the twisted tale of her mother's last months and uncover secrets that turn her world upside

Irwin, Stephen M. The Broken Ones. **Doubleday. Aug. 2012. c.368p. ISBN 9780385534659. $26.** F

The world is reeling from a natural disaster that occurred a few years earlier. In just one day, Earth's poles shifted to affect climate, agriculture, and governmental infrastructure and setting off a global economic crisis. This event is known as Gray Wednesday, the day when the spectral and living worlds became one. Set in Australia, Irwin's (*The Dead Path*) novel is a dystopian tale of crime and the supernatural. Each person is haunted by a ghost, someone from his or her past. However, the identity of the ghost that haunts Det. Oscar Mariani is unknown to him. Mariani is no typical cop: he works only with those who claim to have committed their crimes—murders—at the direction of their ghosts. In a haunted world, Mariani must track down a serial killer who is murdering young women and mutilating their bodies with cryptic occult symbols. VERDICT Genre-bending and imaginative, Irwin's sophomore novel is part fantasy, part supernatural crime thriller. Similar in style and content to the works of Cherie Priest and Richard Matheson, this will appeal to a variety of genre readers who enjoy intelligent fiction that pushes boundaries.—**Carolann Curry, Mercer Univ. Medical Lib., Macon, GA**

Joyce, Rachel. The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry. **Random. Jul. 2012. c.336p. ISBN 9780812993295. $25.** F

Soon after his retirement from a brewery in a quiet English village, Harold Fry receives a surprising letter. It's from beloved friend and colleague Queenie Hennessy, whom he hasn't heard from in 20 years, writing from a distant terminal cancer ward to say good-bye. This letter returns Harold to a horrifically painful part of his past, threatens his already troubled marriage, and ultimately leads to a crisis that casts into doubt everything he thinks he knows about himself. He decides to embark on a 600-mile walk to say goodbye to Queenie in person. Joyce, a former actress and acclaimed BBC scriptwriter here publishing her first novel, depicts Harold's personal crisis and the extraordinary pilgrimage it generates in masterly fashion, exploring psychological complexities with compassion and insight. The result is a novel of deep beauty and wisdom about the human condition; Harold, a deeply sympathetic protagonist, has much to teach us. VERDICT A great novel; essential reading for fans of literary fiction. [See Prepub Alert, 2/27/12.]—**Patrick Sullivan, Manchester Community Coll., CT**

★**Katzenbach, John.** What Comes Next. **Mysterious Pr: Grove/Atlantic. Jun. 2012. c.464p. ISBN 9780802126115. $27.** F

Retired psychology professor Adrian Thomas, recently diagnosed with progressive dementia, witnesses the abduction of a neighborhood teen named Jennifer. Adrian reports the crime to police but also launches an independent search. Despite memory loss and frequent hallucinatory "visits" from deceased relatives, he battles to solve the crime. His investigation leads to the seedy underworld of Internet pornography and snuff pages and eventually to a popular pay-per-view website where voyeurs worldwide are consumed with what comes next for an imprisoned teen known only as Number 4. Will Adrian locate Jennifer before illness overwhelms him? Will his investigation help or deter the police? Will the fate of Number 4 continue to attract online viewers, or will her captors gain more if she dies? Spellbound readers will be turning pages quickly to see what comes next. VERDICT Katzenbach (*The Madman's Tale*; *Hart's War*) has crafted a suspenseful cat-and-mouse thriller, a perfect literary mash-up of *The Truman Show* and *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*. Already an international best seller, this will be widely popular with psychological thriller devotees.—**Mary Todd Chesnut, Northern Kentucky Univ. Lib., Highland Heights**

Kohler, Sheila. The Bay of Foxes. **Penguin. Jun. 2012. c.240p. ISBN 9780143121015. pap. $15.** F

After killing a prison guard to escape internment for being an "aristocratic anarchist," Dawit turns up in Paris, dirt poor and bedraggled. This beautiful son of a titled Ethiopian upper-class family charms M., a celebrated 60-year-old Parisian author, whom he accidentally meets in a café. M. adopts Dawit as her muse and asks him to live with her, spending a fortune on him and even taking him to her second home in Sardinia. Dawit develops new skills and becomes M.'s editor and secretary, but when he refuses to comply with her demands for sex—he is gay—she turns cold and distant and eventually asks him to leave. The novel climaxes in a scene of tense intrigue at the Bay of Foxes, M.'s favorite place to swim. VERDICT Writing in an elegant and sensual style, Kohler (*Becoming Jane Eyre*) creates a sensational novel whose audience will include—but will not be limited to—gay readers.—**Lisa Rohrbaugh, Leetonia Community P.L., OH**

Lee, Don. The Collective. **Norton. Jul. 2012. c.320p. ISBN 9780393083217. $25.95.** F

After meeting in 1988 as freshmen at Macalester College, Eric Cho, Jessica Tsai, and Joshua Meer (who later changes his adoptive surname to Yoon) become friends who share more than their Asian American heritage. Lee, winner of the Edgar and American Book Award for his first novel, *Country of Origin* (2004), presents a no-holds-barred portrait of the three students—the 3AC, or Asian American Artists Collective, as they call themselves—as they break stereotypes to pursue their dreams: Eric and Joshua are aspiring writers, while Jessica is an artist. Eric, who carried a torch for Jessica before discovering that she was a lesbian, narrates the trio's two-decade journey of friendship and artistic discovery. VERDICT Offering strong characterizations and thought-provoking prose, Lee addresses the Asian American experience from various vantage points, realistically examining themes ranging from personal relationships to racism and artistic censorship. His novel has enough depth to spark uninhibited discussion in any book group and, given its time frame, will have special meaning for Gen X readers. [See Prepub Alert, 1/8/12.]—**Shirley N. Quan, Orange Cty. P.L., Santa Ana, CA**

★**MacMahon, Kathleen.** This Is How It Ends. **Grand Central. Aug. 2012. c.352p. ISBN 9781455511310. $24.99.** F

After losing his job at Lehman Brothers, Bruno Boylan travels to Ireland in fall 2008, finally fulfilling a promise he made to his father. In search of his family roots, he meets and falls in love with Addie, an out-of-work architect who is a distant cousin and at first not thrilled with this enthusiastic American. Their developing relationship combines humor with a real sense of joy at finding love at midlife and knowing with absolute certainty that it is right. Secondary characters, including Addie's sister Della and wonderful little dog, Lola, are just as realistic and important to the story. And Bruno's efforts to share his love of Bruce Springsteen's music with Addie make a nice counterpoint to the Irish scenery. When tragedy strikes, it is as unexpected as it is devastating. Tissues will be needed. VERDICT Television journalist MacMahon's enthralling debut novel features marvelous characters who will linger long in readers' hearts. This moving book will appeal to those who enjoy popular contemporary fiction, particularly the work of Maeve Binchy and Barbara Delinsky.—**Elizabeth Mary Mellett, Brookline P.L., MA**

★**Mantel, Hilary.** Bring Up the Bodies. **Holt. 2012. c.432p. ISBN 9780805090031. $28.** F

In her sequel to the Booker Man Prize-winning *Wolf Hall*, Mantel has done what only the most gifted novelist can: she has fleshed out an enigma—the historical cipher that was Thomas Cromwell, Henry VIII's fixer—and made us accept her interpretation of him as valid. Cromwell helped Henry annul his marriage to his wife of 20 years, Catherine, so he could marry

Library Journal

recent *The Year That Follows*, "Highly recommended."

Lee, Don. The Collective. **Norton. Jul. 2012. 352p. ISBN 9780393083217. $25.95.** LITERARY
In 1988, aspiring writer Eric Cho bonds with aspiring pianist Jessica Tsai and another writing hopeful, the gargantuanly talented Joshua Yoon, at Macalester College. Later, in Cambridge, MA, they form the 3AC, the Asian American Artists Collective, working their way through questions of love, art, idealism, and racism. Former *Ploughshares* editor Lee, who won the Sue Kaufman Prize for his first collection, *Yellow*, and both an Edgar and an American Book Award for *Country of Origin*, is a cracking good writer.

Mathews, Francine. Jack 1939. **Riverhead: Penguin Group (USA). Jul. 2012. 288p. ISBN 9781594487194. $26.95.**
THRILLER
President Roosevelt wants to send someone to Europe to figure out what Hitler really intends and to prevent German funds meant to ensure Roosevelt's loss in the 1940 election from reaching America. His choice? John F. Kennedy, the son of America's ambassador to Britain, who's traveling the Continent to collect data for his senior thesis. Rumor has it that this is a fun, fast-paced, sexy thriller, and as Mathews was an intelligence analyst for the CIA in the 1990s, the atmosphere should be authentic.

Piccirilli, Tom. The Last Kind Words. **Bantam. Jun. 2012. 336p. ISBN 9780553592481. $26; eISBN 9780553906356.**
THRILLER
Bram Stoker and International Thriller Writers Award winner Piccirilli breaks into hardcover with the story of Terrier Rand, who abandons the crime life and his small-time grifter family when brother Collie turns killer and wipes out an entire family and then some. (Yes, Rand family members are all named after dog breeds.) But he returns when Collie claims that he wasn't responsible for one of those deaths. Lots of buzz and the start of a new series.

Warren, Dianne. Juliet in August. **Amy Einhorn: Putnam. Jul. 2012. 336p. ISBN 9780399157998. $25.95.** LITERARY
Juliet, Saskatchewan. It's at the edge of the Little Snake sand hills, but it's a small town like any other, with folks quietly getting by as they recognize their limitations or learn to love again. Small-town dwellers and those who enjoy reading about them should identify with everyone and everything, except maybe the camel named Antoinette, lost somewhere in the hills. Winner of Canada's highly regarded Governor General's Award and hence well worth watching.

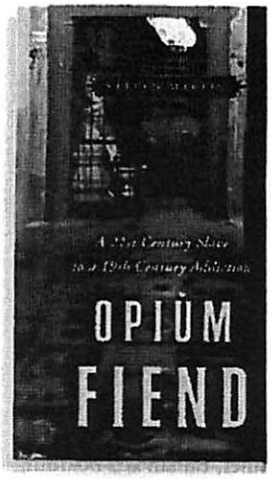
Wilson, G. Willow. Alif the Unseen. **Grove. Jul. 2012. 320p. ISBN 9780802120205. $25; eISBN 9780802194626.**
LITERARY
Author of award-winning graphic novels and comics series, plus the memoir *The Butterfly Mosque*, about her conversion to Islam, Wilson offers a debut novel featuring an Arab-Indian hacker in an unspecified Middle East country. Alif, dedicated to protecting dissidents and others under surveillance, is forced underground when the woman he loves dumps him for a prince who turns out to be the dreaded "Hand of God"—head of the state's electronic security forces. While in hiding, Alif discovers a secret book belonging to a jinn that could change the very concept of information technology. One of the publisher's big books of the season, this intriguing-sounding blend of cyberfantasy and the *Arabian Nights* will be backed by a ten-city tour.

Yu, Charles. Sorry Please Thank You: Stories. **Pantheon. Jul. 2012. 240p. ISBN 9780307907172. $24.95.**
STORIES
Expect the author of the weirdly imaginative *How To Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* to come up with stories that are... weirdly imaginative. Here, a company outsources grief for profit ("Don't feel like having a bad day? Let someone else have it for you"), and an employee working the night shift at a big-box store has an easier time with a zombie than the girl he wants to date. Since *Science Fictional Universe* was a *New York Times* Notable Book, a Discover and Indie Next pick, no. 22 on Amazon's Top 100 of 2010, and more, this should get attention; with a five-city tour.

NONFICTION

Coren, Stanley. Do Dogs Dream? Nearly Everything Your Dog Wants You To Know. **Norton. Jul. 2012. 160p. ISBN 9780393073485. $23.95.** PETS
Author of best sellers like *The Intelligence of Dogs*, Coren is your go-to guy when you're seeking information about canines. Here, using a Q&A format, he brings both his expertise and a certain cheeky flair to 75 questions about the social and emotional lives of dogs, e.g., do they see themselves in the mirror? And when those little paws start moving in their sleep, do they really dream? My dog says yes.

Climate Central, Inc. Global Weirdness: Severe Storms, Deadly Heat Waves, Parching Drought, Rising Seas, and the Weather of the Future.



Look what fascination with tl "old Orient" can cause

Pantheon. Jul. 2012. 176p. ISBN 9780307907301. $22
SCIENCE
We hear so much about climate change, but do w really know all the facts? Climate Central, Inc., a nonprofit, nonpartisan science and journalism organization founded in 2008, is here to help. Instead of long, discursive explanations, the book of 50 entries that aim to be accessible. Is climate ever normal? What has caused climate change in the past Find out here; looks to be great resource for high scl papers, too.

Guy, John. Thomas Becket: Warrior, Priest, Rebel. **Random. Jul. 2012. 416p. ISBN 9781400069071. $35 eISBN 9780679603412.**
BIOGRAPHY
Chancellor to Henry II, tl his nemesis as Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Becket was exiled for six years and assassinated by f of Henry's knights upon his return home. Perhaps well-known story, but Gu has the credentials to tell i well, having lectured in e modern British history an presented five documenta for BBC2 television. Pitched as appropriate for undergraduate use, so definitely for your high-e readers.

Korean-American novelist uses Macalester as backdrop for 'The Collective'

by Euan Kerr, Minnesota Public Radio
December 31, 2012

AUDIO
Korean-American novelist uses Macalester as backdrop for 'The Collective' (feature audio)
Listen to author Don Lee read an excerpt from 'The Collective'

ST. PAUL, Minn. — The Korean-American novelist Don Lee's latest book "The Collective" uses Macalester College in St. Paul as a launching point for a tale about the Asian-American experience. Lee said of his four books so far, "The Collective" is his most personal.

"The Collective" begins with the suicide of Joshua Yoon, a young writer on the verge of making it big. The news leaves his once-close group of college friends reeling.

"We had loved Joshua," Lee writes. "But we'd gradually grown tired of him, and of one another. The fact is if pressed we would each have to confess that we all saw it coming, and we did nothing to prevent it."

The passage was written from the point of view of the members of the 3AC, the Asian-American Artists Collective, as a group of friends who meet at Macalester in the 1980s came to call themselves. It's a volatile group: Joshua, the unofficial leader, delights in criticizing everything and anyone. Lee said he has met leaders of Joshua's type all too often in real life, their dynamism based more on insecurity than confidence.

"And they are often a little bit delusional," Lee said, "and sometimes congenital liars, all of which makes them kind fascinating characters for a book. And so that'd certainly what Joshua ended up to be."

Other 3AC members include Jessica Tsai, a talented painter resisting her parents' desire that she become a doctor; and Eric Cho, the narrator. He also dreams of being a writer but struggles and doubts his own talent, particularly as he watches Joshua produce story after story apparently without breaking a sweat.

Lee, the director of the MFA program at Temple University in Philadelphia, said that as with his other books, "The Collective" began with an underlying area he wanted to explore: "The idea of friendships and the way they form and wane."

He described the novel as a love letter to friendships. It's also a love letter to the school where he taught writing from 2007 to 2008.

"Macalester is just a fantastic school," Lee said. "And I always felt, even thought I left, that it was a class organization, and I really enjoyed my students there. And so, yes, that is part of the love letter."

But there is much more to "The Collective."

Like any group of young people thrown together in the college pressure cooker, the members of the 3AC share life-changing experiences, laugh, cry, fall in and out of love, and most of all, they argue.

Lee said "The Collective" allowed him to explore difficult issues facing Asian-Americans, and artists in particular.

"If you are an Asian-American writer," he said, "do you always have to write about race? Do you always have to make your characters Asian-American? If you don't, is it a form of race betrayal? If you do, are you ghettoizing yourself or perpetuating stereotypes?"

Lee had his characters wrestle with the issues, first in the classroom, as they argue with other students dealing with similar questions about their own identities. Then a racial slur scrawled on a chalkboard ignites a campus-wide debate and results in some real-world consequences.

After graduation the friends end up in Boston, where they expand the collective and begin developing their art. But they also get embroiled in larger controversies and keep fighting among themselves about what it all means.

Lee said that the story in "The Collective" was not autobiographical, but he experienced the realities of being an Asian-American artist when he lived in Boston after he graduated from college.

"A lot of times I would go to literary events and receptions and readings," he said, "and I would find that I was the only non-white person in the room."

Many of the situations described in the novel were based on real things that happened to people Lee knows. He did a lot of research in Boston and Minnesota.

Reviewers have praised "The Collective" for its insight and pathos, and for being genuinely funny. A great deal of the humor arises from Lee's descriptions of intimate details of student life in St. Paul, such as when a certain bell rings, it means a student has lost his or her campus virginity.

"These are things that you don't really know about as a teacher," he said, laughing. "You know only as a student. There were things I found out during my research that really surprised me."

Lee said he was particularly pleased when he received an e-mail from a Mac student who said he had nailed it.

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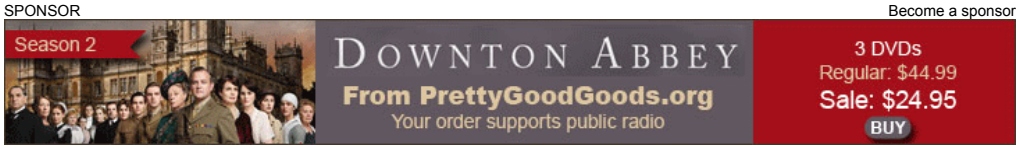


New York Daily News

JULY 26, 2012 2:08 PM 0 COMMENTS

Don Lee tackles art, community and race in 'The Collective'

BY JOYCE CHEN

Let's just put it out there, start with this.

The characters in Don Lee's latest novel — his third, after 2008's "Wrack and Ruin" and his 2005 debut, "Country of Origin" — are predominantly Asian American.

His 2001 collection of short stories "Yellow," which won the Sue Kaufman Prize for First Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, chronicles the interwoven lives of several Asian Americans living in the fictional town of Rosarita Bay, Calif.

And his latest, "The Collective," due out July 16, features three friends named Joshua Yoon, Eric Cho and Jessica Tsai. Lee also reads tonight at the Asian American Writers' Collective.

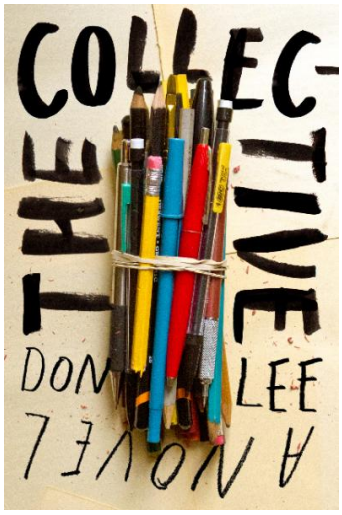
But the ethnicity of Lee's complex characters aren't the main draw, or even the primary focal point, of his books; rather, it's the very relatable tales of heartbreak, fear and identity that make his stories resonate with readers.

In "The Collective," Lee follows the three friends - two writers and an artist, Jessica - from their founding days at the 3AC (Asian American Artists Collective) at Macalester College through their progression as individuals looking to find a place in the literary and artistic worlds.

Eric narrates the novel, and through his eyes, the reader is able to see the interwoven hopes and doubts of a freshly graduated, aspiring young writer and the camaraderie (and creative souls) he finds along the way.

It's not autobiographical by any means, but Lee does admit that the novel, which touches upon issues of pride, culture and tragedy (the story opens with Joshua's suicide several years down the line), is his most personal yet.

Here, he tells the Daily News a bit about his own journey toward becoming an author, the best criticism he ever received, and what it took to harness his energy into just sitting down and writing the damn thing (hint: five albums by alt-country band Clem Snide).



Daily News: It's not unusual for Asian American authors to write about being, well, Asian American. But like several of the novel's characters initially question, do you think it's an insinuated necessity for Asian American authors to write about Asian Americans and the APA experience exclusively?

Don Lee: It does feel like that's been the insinuation, doesn't it? But I'm not sure who's been doing the insinuating, Asian Americans or others. I do remember when I was in grad school, I got a lot of sh-t that I should write about the "Asian American experience," which I resented like hell. Let's say a writer is third-generation German American. Does he or she get pressured to write about Germany or the German American experience? Of course not.

So to rebel, I had white or non-race-specific characters in my stories in grad school. But then I wondered if it was rebellion or Twinkieism. There was certainly a rich well of emotions in my views on identity and racism, and eventually I addressed them full-on in a novella called "Yellow," which became the title story of my collection. Yet the other stories, though they had Asian American characters, didn't address race much, which was remarked upon in reviews as if it were something revolutionary.

DN: What came to you first when brainstorming and writing the book: The characters, the idea of the collective, or how you wanted to approach the themes?

DL: The opening with Joshua's suicide came first. Those three pages are all that remain from another novel, which was going to be very dark and nasty, about a suicidal female poet. I just wasn't feeling that book, though, and after about a year I abandoned it. I say that as if it were a blase decision, but really it threw me into a dep pit of panic and desperation. I thought my career was over, that I'd never write another book. But what got me going with "The Collective" was the thought of friendships, how they form and dissolve. I remembered all these wonderful friends - mostly writers and artists - I'd had in my twenties and thirties in Cambridge, and I wanted to write a love letter to that period of my life, to all the starving artists I'd known.

DN: So did you have a similar real-life "collective," a 3AC of your own when you began delving into the literary world?

DL: Nope, that's all made up. I had groups of writer friends, but they were pretty much all white. Listen, Boston was a very white town back then (still is, comparatively). I'd go to readings and events, and, no sh-t, I'd be the only person there who wasn't white. That's why, later on, I was so excited about the Dark Room Collective, which was a group of young African American poets who ran a reading series with writers of color. I wasn't a member of the Dark Room Collective, but, okay, maybe they were an inspiration for the 3AC.

DN: You include so many references to different kinds of artists and creative thinkers in the novel. What kind of restraints do you think writing might have that art does not in expressing the writer's thoughts, and vice versa?

DL: I have to say, I'm jealous of the immediacy of other artists' mediums. They can have a gallery show or do a performance or present a film, and you can see or hear or understand right away what they've been doing. It's not the same giving a reading. Let's face it, readings are boring most of the time. And you can't give someone your book and get an instant response. Mostly what I'm jealous about, though, is how finite and often collaborative the other arts are. Writing novels is about being in a room alone … for years.

DN: "The Collective" seems rooted in the theme of camaraderie, and what it means to have a community to learn and grow from, even if you don't get along all the time. What's been the most memorable criticism you've ever gotten for your work from your peers?

DL: The most memorable criticism I've ever received was from a well-respected editor who was then at W.W. Norton (ironically the eventual publisher of all my books). That novella, "Yellow" - I sent it to her when I was maybe in my early thirties, and she said she thought I hadn't found my voice yet and maybe I wasn't cut out to be a writer. It took me about five years to get over that comment.

DN: Of your four books, which has been the most personal? The most difficult to write?

DL: Oh, definitely this one. It's not exactly autobiographical, except for some of the narrator's romantic deacles, but it's very personal to me, delving into al the doubts I'd had as an aspiring writer. I came very close to quitting several times. At one point, I was getting applications to MSW programs, thinking I should become a therapist and stop chasing this

quixotic dream of becoming a writer. No one was trying to convince me otherwise.

DN: Who are you reading now and who inspires you?

DL: I've been reading some short novels, since that's what I'm planning to do with my next book: "Train Dreams" by Denis Johnson and "Running Away" by Jean-Philippe Toussaint. But what's inspiring me most is alt-folk indie music (because I'm thinking of having a singer-songwriter as a character): Ryan Adams and his old band, Whiskeytown, Damien Jurado, Iron & Wine, Sun Kil Moon. During the writing of "The Collective," during the most crucial part of the first draft, I played five albums by Clem Snide in continuous rotation. That band saved my life.

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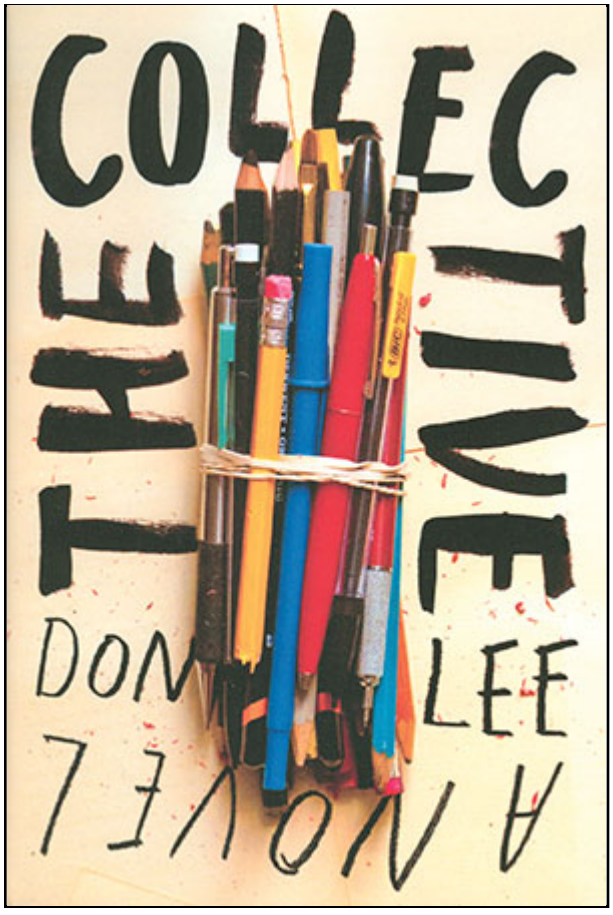
The Collective by Don Lee

Don Lee

New York. W.W. Norton. 2012. ISBN 9780393083217



Sylvia Plath did it with the oven door ajar. John Kennedy Toole did it with a garden hose. Hart Crane did it with the famous farewell, "Goodbye, everybody." The suicides of these thirty-somethings exemplify the tragic tendency of young writers and artists to torture themselves in isolation and self-despair for the sake of their craft. Accordingly, this is what thirty-eight-year-old writer Joshua Yoon was supposed to do as an Asian, an orphan, and an artist. It was the only explanation for someone who "had no reason to do it, and yet he had every reason to do it."

In *The Collective*, the fourth novel by Korean American author Don Lee, the self-inflicted fate of Joshua Yoon is merely the placeholder for a bildungsroman about three artists who meet in the freshman dorms of Macalester College in St. Paul,

Minnesota, in 1988. The three friends later live in an artists' cooperative in Cambridge, Massachusetts, originally the home of Joshua Yoon's deceased parents, and finally disperse along the U.S. coasts.

The Asian Artists Collective, or 3AC, is the constant for narcissistic and passionate Moor, beautiful and intricate Jessica Tsai, and literary romantic Eric Cho—the novel's contemporary Nick Carraway. Their bond strengthens amidst the bigotry of Macalester peers, disloyalty of transient relationships, and a national scandal none of the fledgling artists could imagine.

Lee reveals the complexity of Yoon's fleeting and long-lasting relationships, not only with his significant others, colleagues, and friends but with his past and present stigma as a minority. Yoon voices these stigmas frequently yet unexpectedly throughout the novel. During his initial encounter with Cho at Macalester's orientation, Yoon crudely labels a young woman "yellow cab," which is "California slang for Asian chicks who will only date white guys."

The Collective embodies the sentiments of an oppressed demographic with the witticisms of culturally cognizant artists. These artists intelligently retaliate through prose, brushstrokes, and the poignancy of their artistry, yet contemporary racism and injustice still sting.

Although this novel begins and ends with tragedy, *The Collective* illustrates Yoon's raw humanity and his exploration and grasp of an individual and cultural identity through art, honesty, and friendship.

Molly Evans
University of Oklahoma

<< Back to ALL REVIEWS

The Ivy Power: Don Lee's *The Collective*

Ryan McDermott

New York, NY: Norton, 2012. 314 pages. $25.95.
(Click on cover image to purchase)

In *The Collective*, the most recent installment of the American campus novel, Don Lee presents a group of Asian American artis whose coming-of-age is marked by an irresolvable conflict: the tug-of-war between self-identity and community. For the membe of the 3AC (or Asian American Artists Collective), the process of self-discovery isn't so much about finding an identity as it is about confronting the identities that are, somewhat inescapably, chosen for them—identities based on politics, race, and the expectations that come with belonging to a minority community.

When reading *The Collective*, one can't help but think about the college setting of Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Marriage Plot*, whos Madeleine Hanna, like *The Collective*'s narrator, Eric Cho, questions the possibility of creating truly original work in a postmod age drenched with semiotics, deconstruction, and other forms of what Eric describes as the "lingua-franca of pseudo-intellectualism." The same Stur und Drang that troubles Madeleine, an uncertain prospective PhD student in English, saturates the first-person narration of Eric, a third-generation Korean American from California who, later in the novel, reluctantly enrolls in an MFA writing program. While in a freshman creative writing cours at Macalester College, Eric meets the fiercely intellectual and polemical Joshua Yoon, a Korean student from the East Coast whose many preoccupations include the politics of Asian American art. In the same course, the two befriend Jessica Tsai, a Taiwanese American art student who interested in painting and sculpture. Together, they form the 3AC, a group that expands beyond Macalester to include other artists and writers after t three relocate to Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Although the 3AC is founded early in the novel, it isn't until the three collectively experience related acts of racism that the 3AC becomes an intellectual community. The pain and anger resulting from these and other experiences of racism fuel the activities of the Collective. The group's sen of cohesion is short-lived, as its members become increasingly wary of Joshua's unrelenting politicization of Asian American art. As the Collective begins to dissolve, Joshua becomes unable to see that the very thing that would seem to unite them logically, the experience of being a minority artis is also the thing that begins to push them apart.

The scope of Lee's characters' preoccupations—art made for a small audience—can risk giving them a sense of one-dimensionality. But he saves th from that pitfall. Ultimately, they move us with their tenacious insistence that, indeed, one *can* create beautiful art through perseverance. And one ca create, as well, meaningful relationships with fellow artists. In the case of Joshua and Eric, however, this meaningfulness has a shelf life. From the beginning, the friendship is contentious. When Joshua senses Eric's unfamiliarity with the realities of racism, he chides him for not writing about Asi Americans, claiming that he's been brainwashed into a form of "race betrayal." When Eric begins to date Didi O'Brien, an Irish Catholic from Bosto Joshua accuses him of being a "twinkie" (a stereotypical term for an Asian person who mainly associates with white people), attempting to convince him that Didi is only fascinated with his racial difference—in other words, "slumming." Such withering critiques from Joshua continue throughout th novel. When Eric come to terms with Joshua's rage, this gap in the narrative is filled: "Although I relished his counsel and company, I was wary of him at times, wary of how critical, noisome, and dogmatic he could be, of his predilection for creating drama and havoc, of the inequity in our roles, and wary, too, of his dependence on me, his neediness."

Although their friendship doesn't dissolve until the end of the novel, it has been marked by death from the very beginning. In the opening pages, for one-year-old Eric ruminates about the possible reasons for Joshua's suicide. When Eric visits Joshua for the last time, we surmise that their friendshi has reached a symbolic end. As Joshua tells Eric, "You have been a great friend to me, Eric. My best friend. . . . But you stopped needing me a long time ago." Recalling the words of Didi O'Brien, with whom Eric reconnects and marries, Eric realizes that Joshua "would never have what I now possess—a life beyond the pursuit of art."

For Eric, it would seem, the "problem" with being an "idealist" like Joshua is that it comes with too heavy a price. We can't help but see a similar conflict between idealism and reality in the academic pursuits of Madeleine Hanna, Mitchell Grammaticus, and Leonard Bankhead, the triangle at th heart of *The Marriage Plot.* For them, like the original trifecta of the 3AC, the pursuit of the academic dream in a postgraduate world is undercut by deeper tension between self-identity and reality. The acute psychological realism that both Lee and Eugenides bring to the campus novel suggests th the college experience and all of its attendant idealism is ultimately unsustainable. In both *The Marriage Plot* and *The Collective*, the sacred division between the university and the outside world crumbles, only to be replaced by a gulf between the artist and the world around him—a world that is, a Lee reminds us, inimical to the artist's vision. And in the case of Joshua Yoon, who becomes unable to distinguish between art and life, it is a world that is, in many ways, his own self.

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Ryan McDermott is a writer and editor living in San Francisco, California. After receiving his PhD in English from UC Berkeley, he became the copyediting director at Goodby Silverstein & Partners, an ad agency in San Francisco. His work has been published in the *San Francisco Guardian*, *Cinespect*, *Angelaki*, and *In Our Words*.

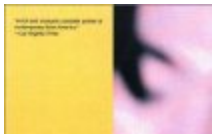
Don Lee's Pure Stories

Posted on May 27, 2013 **by** BLOOM Leave a comment

by Terry Hong

When **Don Lee**'s first book debuted in April 2001, he probably didn't know that he was the forerunner of a colorful trend – literally. His collection, *Yellow*, had the shortest of subtitles, simply *Stories*. Three months later, in July, another yellow-tinted cover appeared: *Yell-Oh Girls!: Emerging Voices Explore Culture, Identity, and Growing Up Asian American* edited by **Vickie Nam**, in which young Asian American girls from all over the country shared poems, essays, and stories that spoke of their bicultural roots. And then 9/11 hit … moment of silence … and the end of that fateful year seemed to be just the right time for the publication of law professor **Frank H. Wu**'s *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White*.

Among those various shades of yellow, Don Lee's is my personal favorite. The quirky collection of short stories is populated by the inhabitants of a fictional California seaside town, not unlike the real-life Half Moon Bay along Northern California's coastal Highway 1. Lee's memorable characters are convincing; as a onetime Golden State resident, I swear I've run into some of them!



"Late … according to whom?" indeed! Lee was 41

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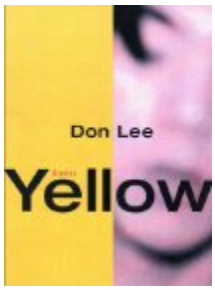

when his *Yellow* hit the shelves. After almost two decades of encouraging, editing, publishing other people's writing for *Ploughshares*, at 38, hoping to avoid middle-age 'coulda-woulda-shoulda'-reget, Lee decided to produce a book of his own by the time he hit 40. His timing was a bit optimistic, so he revised the plan to *sell* that first book by the big 4-0; remarkably, his birth week arrived complete with a book contract. Clearly, I wasn't the only one playing colorful favorites: that 40th birthday sale won Lee the Sue Kaufman Prize for First Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, as well as the Members Choice Award from the Asian American Writers' Workshop.

As the son of a second-generation Korean American and his Korean-born wife, Lee is technically classified as a third-generation Korean American, although he was born in Tokyo where his career diplomat father was working at the U.S. State Department. From Japan, the family moved to Korea when Lee was four, where he had his first identity crisis: "Japanese was my first language," he said to me in a 2004 interview for *AsianWeek*. "But here I was in Korea, speaking only Japanese. I was a little confused to say the least. I thought I was a Japanese kid, but now I was a Korean kid?" To add to his bewilderment, the Lee family lived on a U.S. Army base in Seoul. "Now I was an American, Korean, and Japanese," he says. "And that's all you need to know why I'm so hung up on identity," he laughs.

Identity is at the crux of Lee's first novel, *Country of Origin*, which came out in 2004. Not one of his characters is who he or she appears to be … not Tom Hurley, the half-Korean foreign service officer stationed in Japan, nor his photographer lover, nor her CIA husband. And then there's Kenzo Ota, the Japanese policeman assigned to investigate the aptly named Lisa Countryman, an African-American hapa whose disappearance brings all the characters together. *Country of Origin* earned Lee an American Book Award and a Mixed Media Watch Image Award for Outstanding Fiction. He also won the Edgar Award for Best First Novel – the Edgar being the top literary prize for mysteries – although he'll be the first to tell you that he never intended to write *that* sort of mystery: "I intended to write a sort of **Graham Greene** political novel, but it strongly appealed to mystery readers, for which I was extremely grateful. Mystery readers buy a lot of books. It also ended up to be my most translated book, and for unknown reasons

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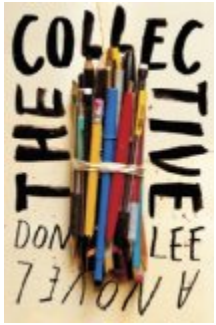
especially struck a chord with German readers."

Short stories. Check. Mystery. Check. How about a comedy of family errors next? A finalist for the Thurber Prize, Lee's 2008 *Wrack and Ruin* sent readers back to Rosarita Bay to meet two mismatched brothers – an artist-turned-brussels-sprouts farmer and his estranged money-and-image-obsessed-now-movie-producer brother – in the midst of an unintended reunion of sorts. Note to literary trivia hunters: *Ruin* quite possibly contains the only pages on which you'll ever find a windsurfing chase scene.

Yes, Lee himself is an avid windsurfer. But that's about the only personal detail you'll get in his fiction … that is, until his latest, *The Collective*, which was published last summer. Let it be known that in spite of Lee's self-admitted "doom and gloom" about this novel – "with the way the book business is going, the chances of things going well are slim," Lee opined in an interview with me for Bookslut.com just before the July 2012 pub date – the novel won the 2013 Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature from the Asian Pacific American Librarians Association.

Although Lee insists that *The Collective* – his only novel written in first-person – is *not* autobiographical, he will admit to "quite a few autobiographical elements in the book." The title refers to the 3AC, the Asian American Artists Collective, founded by three friends who meet at Macalaster College and reunite after graduation in Boston. Eric Cho, who narrates the novel, is a Korean American from southern California with hopes of becoming a published writer someday. Jessica Tsai is an independent, feisty artist, the child of Taiwanese immigrant parents from upstate New York. Joshua Yoon is a brilliant, angry Korean adoptee, raised as the privileged only child of two liberal Harvard professors. Joshua's violent, shocking suicide – which happens in the second paragraph, so no spoilers here – opens *The Collective*.



Autobiographical overlaps are significant enough that Lee offers a page of "Tidbits" on his personal website revealing what's real and what's not. What he doesn't mention there is that he and Eric Cho share a southern California history – Cho grows up there, Lee went to undergrad at UCLA when he finally moved Stateside after his parents' Asian adventures. They also overlap at Macalaster College where Lee was an associate professor of creative writing. While Cho gets his East Coast MFA at the fictional Walden

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College, where he reluctantly teaches freshman comp, Lee was thus degreed and also taught at real-life Emerson College in Boston. Like his protagonist, Lee spent years working at a prestigious literary journal – he was the principle editor of *Ploughshares* for 19 years: "[T]he old *Ploughshares* office in Watertown … was the shithole I describe for *Palaver*," Lee confesses. He insists that "**DeWitt Henry**, the founding editor of *Ploughshares,* was nothing like *Palaver'*s Evan Paviromo," but admits that he (Lee) "did everything that Eric does in the book." If pushed, Lee also admits that "a few of my romantic disasters" can be found between the pages, although he's not offering any more details than that.

While Lee has been experimenting with various genres – short stories, mystery, comedy, his latest *bildungsroman* – his work has consistently examined issues of race and identity, so that younger writers can, ironically, move beyond labels, he says. He recalled one of his "favorite experiences" from his debut book tour when a young Korean American with authorly aspirations asked him "[D]o I have to write about being Korean American?" Lee's answer: "'No, because I'm doing that for you. My generation has to deal with those kinds of questions so the next generations won't have to, and you can just tell pure stories.'"

Here's a story you won't find in Lee's latest: Joshua Yoon, *The Collective'*s suicidal, most outspoken character, gains fictional fame and fortune for a first book called *Upon the Shore*, which is set on Korea's Cheju Island. I immediately thought of *Once the Shore*, the much-lauded debut title from **Paul Yoon** – one of the "5 Under 35" writers recognized by the National Book Foundation in 2010 – which is set on an imaginary Korean island not unlike Cheju. [Let me mention that Paul Yoon's debut novel coming this August, *Snow Hunters*, is perfection.]

"I'm good friends with Paul Yoon," Lee admits, "and it was all an inside joke, but now you've outed us, dammit!" The real-life Yoon's then-girlfriend, now wife, writer **Laura van den Berg**, was a former student of Lee's at Emerson College; the three lived within blocks of each other, and today Yoon and van den Berg are two of Lee's "dearest friends." Last April, Lee got himself a one-day JP (Justice of the Peace) license – also known as a "one-day solemnization certificate" – in order to officiate the Yoon/van den Berg wedding. Lee insists, Yoon "is not at all like Joshua … I'm much more like Joshua than [Paul] is – morose and prone to depression and pessimistic by nature."

Thanks goodness for Lee that windsurfing cures all. He's not planning

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anymore chase scenes, but he's taking a chunk of time to catch some Caribbean waves – his reward for surviving the latest book tour onslaught, and another year (his fourth) professor-ing at Temple University's MFA program: "I can't begin to describe how much publication fucks with my head. It's months of anticipation, and dread, and hope, and disappointment, and momentary pipe dreams, and despair, and last chances to be saved, and humiliation." For now, he's riding out the limbo of looking forward to and dreading, planning, confronting, and eventually writing that next new novel.

Terry Hong writes BookDragon, a book review blog for the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center.

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New in paperback: 'The Collective,' 'The People of Forever Are Not Afraid' and more

Vikas Turakhia By **Vikas Turakhia**
on August 08, 2013 at 9:00 AM, updated August 08, 2013 at 9:05 AM

I picked up Don Lee's campus novel, **The Collective** (W.W. Norton, 320 pp., $15.95), to slake nostalgia that creeps up this time of year. Watching soon-to-be college freshmen fill store carts with more dorm supplies than they will ever need, it's nearly impossible not to smile at their naivete and excitement.

Beginning in 1988, "The Collective" follows a trio of Asian-Americans from their first day of college onward. Joshua, with intelligence, artistic skill, didacticism and financial comfort, leads, while Jessica and Eric follow. Jessica views Joshua with ambivalence, but Eric, who narrates, can't suppress his unmitigated admiration.

With its central characters and academic setting, "The Collective" calls up Jeffrey Eugenides' "The Marriage Plot." But, while I mostly enjoyed reading Eugenides' novel, it hasn't stayed with me. Bookended with two tragedies, "The Collective" offers a story that is quieter and less esoteric, but in its grounding, Lee's book easily went beyond satiating my wistfulness. Its bittersweet elements caught me off-guard and give the novel staying power as Lee concludes that the relationships that shape us can be "ephemeral and, quite possibly, illusory to begin with."

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Books

On Being An Artist: Don Lee's 'The Collective'

By Zachary Houle *5 December 2012*

PopMatters Associate Music Editor

What does it mean to be a writer or an artist in this day and age? And what does it mean when you're an Asian American pursuing a career in the arts? These are the questions that third time novelist Don Lee puts forth in his breathtaking new novel, *The Collective*, which follows three friends of Asian American descent throughout their 20s, first in college and then living together in Boston, as they try to make a mark for themselves in the art world.

That alone would be a worthy plot line for anyone interested in bohemian lifestyles, but there'ss more to these characters than just sitting around and pontificating about their various pursuits and endeavours. These are normal human beings who go to a Sonic Youth concert, mill about in tony restaurants, and manage to scrabble up enough cash to go on the odd dream vacation every now and then.

The Collective

Don Lee

(W. W. Norton & Company; US: Jul 2012)

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Lee doesn't make these lives sentimental in any way. In fact, you may wind up wishing you could have a pint with them, flaws be damned and all, due to all of their seemingly ordinariness.

The Collective is probably something of an autobiographical book for Lee – who has previously published the novels *Wrack and Ruin* and *Country of Origin*, and a short-story collection called

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Yellow. Not only does its main narrator, Eric Cho, work for a small literary magazine, while Lee was the editor of the noted *Ploughshares* literary journal for a period, but its characters navigate through the world of applying for arts grants and wishing that they could walk home with some literary prizes, to which Lee is no stranger, having won an American Book Award, the Sue Kaufman Prize for First Fiction, the Edgar Award for Best First Novel, an O. Henry Award and a Pushcart Prize.

You do get the sense from some of the questions that Lee poses with his novel, to which there are probably no easy answers, that the grist for the mill that he brings forth is probably culled from his own personal life and conversations. Essentially, a large tract or sub-plot of *The Collective* deals with the questions of race and racism, and the thought that you might be betraying your art if you are Asian American, but don't deal with Asian American issues within it, whether it be writing or painting. In fact, characters here are posed as being racist for writing about white people in their short stories, or for dating outside their ethnicity in romantic relationships.

This was a thoughtful book for me, as a Caucasian. I consider myself to be fairly open-minded about other cultures, but I've probably asked someone of Asian descent in my past the question that rankle these characters throughout the novel: Where are you from? For me, the Asian-Pacific area of the world is so rich with different cultures and ethnicities – Chinese, Japanese, Korean and more – that are conversely seemingly so similar and intertwined that it can be, at times, and at least for me, hard to tell people apart. *The Collective*, then, has a useful utility in that it challenges one's perceptions about Asian peoples, and you walk away from it with the resolve to be more respectful of people's races and backgrounds, to broach questions of ethnicity with sensitivity.

Granted, race and ethnicity gets broached a number of times in *The Collective*, and at one point the ongoing discussion of these matters is characterized by one character as "whining". *The Collective* tends to bludgeon the issue, true, but you forgive Lee as he looks to topics of race in pop culture as a reference point. Lee's characters dismiss the portrayal of Asians in such movies or plays as *Miss Saigon*, *The Killing Fields* (which seems to be an unlikely candidate on the surface, given its sombre subject matter), *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and in particular, the role of Long Duk Dong ("The Donger") in John Hughes' '80s teen classic *Sixteen Candles*.

The Collective also offers an interesting character-driven storyline that one can get lost within. The story is one of three artists – Cho, who is a writer; Jessica Tsai, a visual artist; and the insufferable Joshua Yoon, who goes on to be a novelist of some renown – as they meet at the Midwestern Macalester College (the same liberal arts college where Bob Mould studied before dropping out to go on to great success with his first band, Hüsker Dü), and then go on to live together in the late '90s in a sort of artistic commune in Boston. The three wind up forming the Asian American Artists Collective (or the 3AC for short) and this blossoms into a full-fledged organization complete with potlucks and a writing group with many other people joining by the time the trio resume their respective careers in Boston.

Joshua is something of the leader, and is also a sort of shady Gatsby-esque character who pulls the group into some less-than-ideal dealings. In one of the novel's true flourishes, Joshua is both immediately likeable and deeply flawed. Towards the end of the story, Lee writes, "Joshua was a liar, a narcissist, a naysayer, a bully, and a misogynist, a whiner, misanthrope, and cynic." And yet,

for all of his faults, and there are many, you sort of wind up rooting for him, even as he does evil things such as fabricating a story of woe as a guest at an AA meeting, tearing down the work of other writers that is actually pretty good, and getting a hairdresser friend of his embroiled in offering (illegal) massages in an effort to drum up business.

The Collective is also a rumination on failed dreams that is often quite touching and can be easily related to for those pursuing a second career as an artist. "At what point is it acceptable to give up?" Lee asks at one point. "You get into your thirties, and every day you wonder if it's worth it to keep going. How long can you continue being a starving artist? Will it ever happen for you? Very possibly, it will not. Then where will you be? Sometime or another, you have to decide." As such, *The Collection* is a moving testament to those who have, at some milestone in their lives, decided that the luxury of a day job and all of the financial stability that it brings is more important that slaving over a keyboard or a canvass in pursuit of a dream that may not quite exist, which is the sad, unfortunate reality for most people whiling away their hours in quiet servitude to their own muse.

Granted, *The Collective* does has its share of flaws: the narrative sometimes jumps around temporally, making it confusing at times to know what events are taking place when, and some of the issues of race and identity in art could have been trimmed just so as to not feel like the author was hitting readers over the head with a sledgehammer. That said, *The Collective* is an enjoyable feast of artistic abandon, one that sweeps up readers in a colossal tidal wave of bewilderment, as these protagonists go on to have their shares of success and failures (mostly the latter) in restrained measures.

Don Lee has created a bold and beautiful novel both about race and also what chasing after your dreams can actually entail. What does it mean to be an artist? What does it mean to be an Asian American artist? Those questions do not easily give way to pat resolutions but, at the very least, Lee has the courage to pose the issues and at least acknowledge that there are no firm responses that can be easily done away.

Rating: 7

Zachary Houle is a writer living in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. He has been a Pushcart Prize nominee for his short fiction, and the recipient of a writing arts grant from the City of Ottawa. He has had journalism published in SPIN magazine, The National Post (Canada), Canadian Business, and more.

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BookBrowse Review

BookBrowse Reviews *The Collective*: A coming-of-age novel about race and the dream of becoming an artist

The Collective
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by Don Lee
Hardcover, Jul 2012,
320 pages.
Publication information

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Review

Don Lee's struggles as a Korean American author seem to mirror those of other "hyphenated Americans," trying to break free of molds often defined by stereotypes of their nationalities. In an age where "post-racial" has become a buzzword, why does it still seem important for authors of certain stripes to strictly color within the lines? Should an author of mixed heritage write only about the immigrant experience?

To answer these questions, or at least to begin a discussion, Lee features the lives of three Asian American artists in his novel *The Collective*. The narrator, Eric Cho, is a third-generation Korean American who grew up in Mission Viejo, California, largely free from any discrimination that he could notice. The driver of the story, Joshua Yoon (Meer) is a "1.5" - a Korean American adoptee born in South Korea and brought up by two Jewish professors in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Finally, there's second-generation Taiwanese American Jessica Tsai who bears the weight of her immigrant parents' expectations when she attends Macalaster College in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1988.

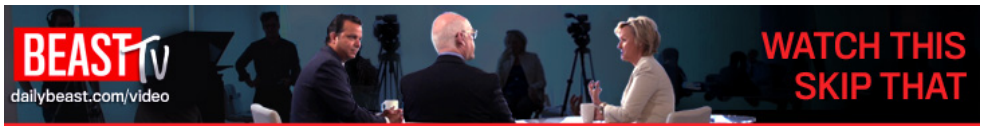
While at college, the three artists are thrown together and become close friends. Josh and Eric want to be writers while Jessica is looking to become a visual artist, and they loosely form a group that Josh christens the 3AC - the Asian American Artists Collective. The novel follows the trio as they move on to their adult lives in Cambridge, and Lee does a fantastic job of detailing their everyday adventures in Massachusetts - the sights and sounds of the city come alive in the telling. (However, a word of caution: There are some strong sexual themes in the book, and while they don't smother the story arc, they might make some readers squeamish.)

Where Lee especially shines is in addressing all manner of existential questions. It would not be a reveal to say that Joshua Yoon commits suicide - this forms the book's first chapter, and the rest of the novel essentially traces his path down to it. In analyzing the intersection of race and art, Lee brings to the fore wonderful analyses of both - "I didn't know what it meant to be Korean, or Asian, or Asian American. I only felt American," says Cho, who serves as the narrator of the novel. *The Collective* is also a fantastic meditation on the nature of art and what it should represent. The author uses a quote by Kafka to make a strong point here: "Art's not about being didactic. There's nothing more boring or tedious than art. Art should simply be about what makes us human. Its only obligation, if anything, is to break the frozen sea within us."

Lee achingly describes the compromises we make when we reach middle age. How long should one be a starving artist? Is it that bad to crave occasional creature comforts? "Youth is about promise. As you approach your forties, it's about how you've come up short of those dreams, and your life becomes what you do with that recognition," says Cho, now 41.

Lee, who is in his early 50's, has said that the novel is not autobiographical even if he can identify with Joshua's disposition - morose, prone to depression, and pessimistic by nature. It is apparent, however, that *The Collective* served as a great release for Lee's contemplative temperament - you can almost see him take every side in every philosophical issue that comes up.

Lee has also mentioned that he wants to shed light on how Asian Americans wrestle internally with race. Sometimes *The Collective* wears this agenda on its sleeve too readily, but it serves as a must-read for everyone interested in the discussion of racial identity and its place in our supposedly post-racial world. Even if these issues can be addressed internally within an individual race, even if a minority artist can move beyond the confines dictated by the stereotypes of his racial identity, one question still looms large: Will society as a whole welcome it? Coming from a gifted writer like Lee, the answer, we hope, will most definitely be yes.



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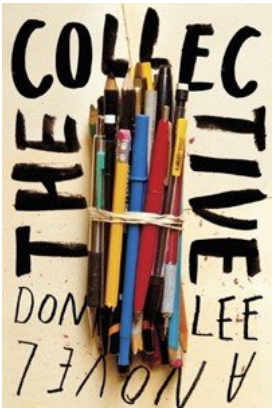
The Collective
By Don Lee

An Asian-American writer commits suicide, and his manipulative ways make us think of David Foster Wallace's or Randall Jarrell's art make their suffering all worth it.



The task to understand the collective experience of the Asian American might also be far too complex for just a handful of good writers to tackle. A great many things are—that's why the mystery of artistic creation continue. Another question is whether artistic creation is worth all the pain after all. It brings to mind the death of David Foster Wallace, or the "suicide" of the poet and fabulous literary critic Randall Jarrell, who was struck by a car. That is the way Joshua Yoon was killed, as revealed in the second page of *The Collective*. From there the novel revisits Yoon's past, including the Asian-American Artists Collective he formed with his fellow writer friend Eric Cho and the painter/sculptor Jessica Tsai. Lee explores what it means to be Asian-American and exactly what kind of racism we face, though the examination would be helped without the obligatory mentions of Bruce Lee, Charlie Chan, Cantopop and the fact that we are smart enough to occasionally read *The Atlantic*. Yoon is revealed to be manipulative and dangerous, and the novel asks whether it is his antics that make him a brilliant

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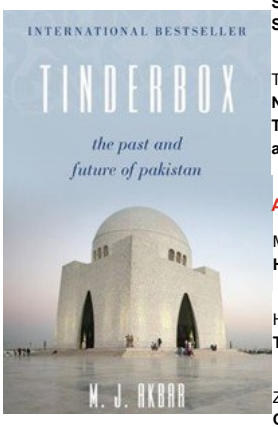
artist. Who knows—maybe it's all in his genes.

Tinderbox
By M.J. Akbar

The future of Pakistan is unknowable, and the present is a great mystery to those who are trying to navigate the "alliance" with the country. An acclaimed journalist gives us the one thing he can: an illuminating history.



Subtitled *The Past and Future of Pakistan*, Akbar's history is entirely all past and no future, if only that there might not even be a future in that tinderbox of a nation. In fact, what is the present state of that country? We don't even know whether Pakistan is an ally to the U.S. or not. The "strategic dialogue" sought between the two has collapsed after countless drone strikes, betrayal by the I.S.I., the Raymond Davis affair, and the killing of Osama bin Laden. What remains can seem like a blackhole, but that doesn't mean it's unknowable—you only have to get sucked in, as Akbar has, to emerge with some clarity of the past, and to put down the story of these "midnight children," who built a nation on the very idea of fracture. No wonder the Muslim state that resulted is today so impossibly factioned.

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Jimmy So is deputy books editor at *Newsweek*/The Daily Beast. He has been a contributor for *The New Yorker*.com, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *The Seattle Times,* and *CBS News*.com. He's the recipient of the 2011 Pulitzer Traveling Fellowship for arts and cultural criticism, and holds a Master of Arts from Columbia University. Follow him on Twitter @jimmyso.

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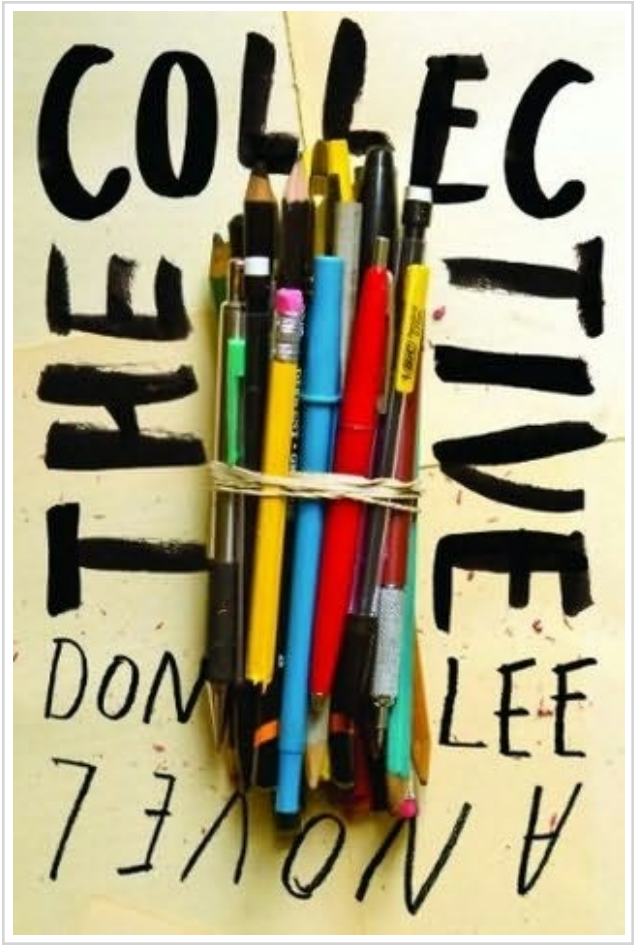

Don Lee's latest novel, *The Collective* (http://www.amazon.com/The-Collective-Novel-Don-Lee/dp/0393083217/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1342115472&sr=8-1&keywords=the+collective+don+lee/hyphenmagazin-20), centers around three Asian American friends who meet during their college years and eventually go on to create an Asian American artistic collective in Boston. The narrator, Eric Cho, is a third generation Korean American who moves to the Midwest for college because he "had felt lost, merely another Asian American among the multitudes" in Southern California. He lacks any real association with his Korean heritage -- he cannot speak or understand Korean -- and only self-identifies as Asian American because of his appearance. While at college, he befriends Joshua Yoon, who becomes Eric's id and Lee's mouthpiece for espousing various rants against Asian stereotypes. Joshua is brash, hypersexual, loud, and at times grating. Unlike Eric, he readily embraces his Korean background despite being adopted by a Caucasian couple. The other main character is Jessica Tsai, a

Taiwanese American artist who rejects her traditional parents and who identifies more with being a lesbian rather than being interested in Asian American issues.

The relationship between these three characters becomes the main thrust of the novel, and the means by which Lee explores the capability of friends to both support and destroy each other. Eric's initial resistance to identify as Asian American makes him the unwitting target for Joshua's verbal abuse about ignoring the negative effect of Asian stereotypes. At one point in the novel, Eric refers to Joshua as a "liar, a narcissist, a naysayer, a bully, and a misogynist," yet he spends most of the novel under Joshua's thrall. It's a testament to Lee's engaging prose and characterization that a character such as Joshua remains interesting and somehow likable despite his brutal nature. Likewise, Eric, as a stand in for the type of Asian American male that Joshua refers to as "the eunuchs of the world," precariously exists between being a pathetic and endearing character. Though I gnashed my teeth several times while reading passages about Eric's desire to be with Caucasian women, I still saw myself and countless other Asian American males in him. In Joshua, I saw the brave, outspoken, anti-racist Asian American male that is never portrayed in broader media.

Photo of the author by Melissa Frost

While Lee does a marvelous job in crafting and creating the characters of Eric

and Joshua, he falls a bit short with Jessica. Though she is one of the central characters of the novel, she lacks a clear sense of purpose; that is, perhaps, by design, as Jessica wanders in and out of the narrative after rejecting the path her parents created for her. Outside of her sexuality, Jessica is constantly looking for an identity. Like Eric, she represents herself as Asian American only when she needs to, as when she finds herself embroiled in a battle over artistic censorship later in the novel. It is probably not a coincidence that this sequence is one of the weaker parts of the novel. Her opponent in her censorship battle is a comically "white" and racist Bostonian, a character meant to be caricature, for sure, but his misdeeds are a bit too grandiose and mean spirited to come off as realistic. Instead, the character comes off like a villain in a comic book, and his verbal abuse towards Jessica only spurs Joshua and Eric to come to her rescue rather than allowing her to have a moment to claim a racial or gender based identity.

Still, the novel at its core is still a character and dialogue driven piece, and the dialogue is smart and well written. Eric's narration, like the character itself, finds itself bordering two worlds: the casual style in which friends speak to each other, and the more distinguished language of an aspiring writer trying to find his own voice. Joshua's dialogue comes off brash, angry, and feisty. Jessica's dialogue lacks distinction, which is in line with her broader characterization. When the characters speak to -- and hurt -- each other, it is all the more impactful because they are realistically drawn and believable. And that, in turn, makes the novel a truly engrossing read.

As the characters grow older and drift away from each other Lee has Eric deliver this missive: "Inevitably, you begin to identify your old friends with what you're trying to discard; you associate them with the wreckage." For Eric, and for Lee, friendships are both necessary and harmful; they both define our personalities and detract from them. Lee's exploration of every aspect of this dynamic makes for a compelling work of literature.

Noah Cho teaches English at Marin Country Day School in Corte Madera, California.

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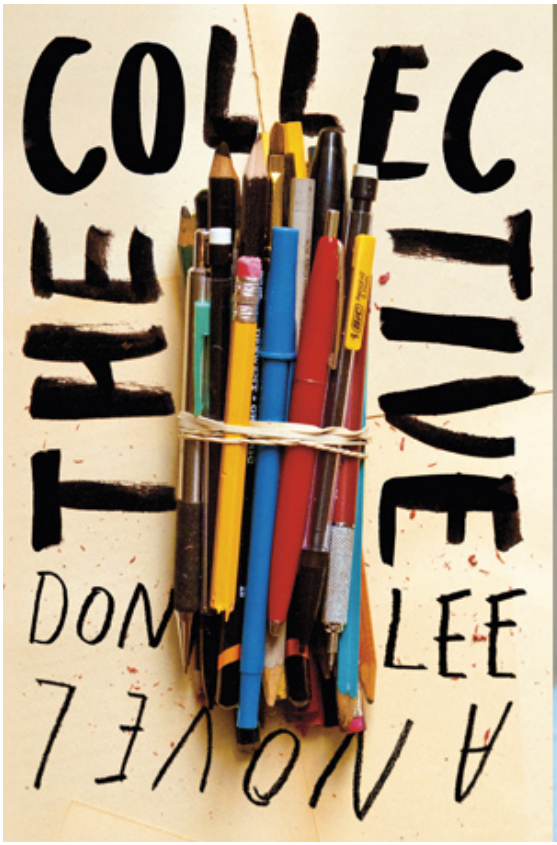
Asian American Literature Fans

A Review of Don Lee's The Collective (WW Norton, 2012).



I rarely like to make predictions about how a particular work will be received, but it's unquestionable that Don Lee's fourth work (after Yellow: Stories, Country of Origin, and Wrack and Ruin) will find major interest among academics and those concerned with ethnic studies—oh, and of course we hope, with a wide popular audience, but that is to be assumed. Soon enough, critical articles and book chapters will be devoted to the novel. The Collective is a metafiction and a metacommentary on the question and the complications of Asian American literary representations. The novel begins ominously with the suicide of a 38 year old Korean American, Joshua Yoon, who runs into the path of a speeding car, who also in the process ends up inadvertently killing a young child in that collision. The story is narrated from the perspective of Joshua's best friend, Eric, and what follows is a retrospective on their friendship and the formation of a group known as 3AC, an Asian American artists' collective, which will at some point be based out of Joshua's home on the East Coast. The core of the group remains Joshua, a talented writer who has ends up publishing three books, Eric himself, and Jessica Tsai, a Taiwanese American sculpture and artist. Though there is much tension both sexual and racial among these three, they nevertheless still forge a strong "collective" with the intent of supporting and disseminating Asian American culture out into the world. Naturally, given the very complexities and problems that have rooted the term Asian America, the group suffers from squabbles over its vision and what actually defines "Asian American." The group finally begins to unravel when one of Jessica Tsai's art installations is targeted by area politicians for simply being a form of pornography. There is an elegiac quality to Lee's work here, despite all its humor and

comedic sex scenes, suggestive of the futility of creating Asian American art in the wake of postmodernism and post-race discourse and the relative fantasy of an audience perhaps more strictly attuned to the most common themes of the field (broadly defined). Fans of Lee's work across his oeuvre can rest assured about some familiar tropes and character types. Eric is not unlike many other iterations of sensitive, earnest but wounded Asian American heterosexual male characters that can be found in his other publications. Further still, Lee makes passing references to Rosarita Bay, the geographical terrain of his first and third publications and characters from those works do appear, such as Caroline Yip, one of my favorite characters from Yellow, deemed an "Oriental Hair Poet." Nowhere to be seen, from what I recall, was Marcella Ahn. But that's just splitting Asian hairs.