books

Yellow Power Redux

Don Lee's highly praised fourth book, *The Collective*, about three Asian American artists, is his most personal yet.

by VIVIEN KIM THORP

TRANSNATIONAL ADOPTION, interracial dating, the ephemeral nature of friendship and the pitfalls of pursuing a life in the arts—these are just a few of the topics that author Don Lee covers in his latest book, *The Collective*.

A tale of three Asian American would-be artists, the novel is a classic *bildungsroman*, set in Minnesota and later Massachusetts. Since its publication last July, *The Collective's* accolades have included a glowing review in *The Boston Globe* (a "hilarious and winning story") and a nod from the *New Yorker* (a "smart" and "subdued third novel"). And an NPR correspondent named it part of the new "collegiate canon," alongside Jeffrey Eugenides' recent bestseller, *The Marriage Plot*.

The novel begins when Joshua Yoon, a 38-year-old writer, commits suicide by throwing himself into the path of a car. It's September of 2008, and one of his only friends, fellow writer Eric Chang, is left to distribute his estate. As Eric deals with Joshua's meager belongings, he begins to reminisce, tracing their friendship back 20 years, to their freshman year of college in 1988.

Published by W. W. Norton, *The Collective* is Lee's fourth book. His first, *Yellow*, a collection of short stories, was published in 2001. Two novels, *Country of Origin* and *Wrack and Ruin*, followed. Of the four, *The Collective* is the most personal work. Lee insists it's not autobiographical, although his characters' lives do often parallel that of the real-life Don Lee. Told in the first person, the novel is set both at Macalaster College in St. Paul, Minn., where Lee taught writing from 2007 to 2008, and in Boston and Cambridge, Mass., where he lived for 23 years. Like Lee, Eric has a sister four years his senior and spends years as the editor of a literary journal. And like Lee, the narrator's mother dies when he is only 30 years old, an event Lee says, that forever changed his life.

In the novel, Joshua, Eric and Jessica Tsang, an aspiring painter, wade into adulthood, reuniting post-graduate school, in a house in Cambridge. Amongst the stories of thwarted love, youthful ambition and sex (of which there is a great deal), there is a steady flow of Asian American cultural references, from debates on interracial dating (Twinkies and rice chasers) to a discourse on the nuances of Asian hair: "different from Caucasian hair—thicker, heavier, coarser, harder to cut, more prone to cowlicks."

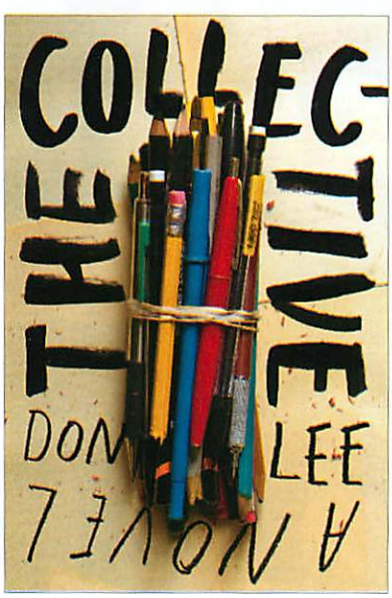
Plagued by requests for Chinese restaurant recommendations and stereotypes like Suzie Wong and Long Duck Dong, Eric and Joshua organize their motley crew of Asian Pacific Islander writers, painters and photographers into the 3AC, or the Asian American Artist Collective, from which the novel's name is derived:

> *"We would instigate a grassroots movement, Yellow Power redux, through our art. We'd celebrate our heritage in our work and foster unity, and we'd help shape our generation's literary and artistic attitudes."*

Lee is a third-generation Korean American. His father was born in Honolulu, his mother in Seoul. His father worked for the U.S. State Department, and Lee was born in Tokyo, growing up between Korea, the U.S. and Japan. Lee says he learned to speak Japanese, before Korean or English, from the family's maid. It wasn't until his dad was relocated to Seoul that it dawned on him that he wasn't from Japan.

After graduating from an international high school in Tokyo, Lee set out for UCLA with plans to be a mechanical engineer. "I had this crazy idea I'd eventually get a Ph.D. in physical oceanography and then build and pilot underwater submersibles," he says. Instead, bored with his physics and chemistry classes, he took a creative writing class. "Finding that verbal outlet enlightened me," he says. One creative writing class led to another. And instead of plumbing the ocean depths, Lee graduated with an English literature degree.

In his novels and stories, Lee's characters are often of Asian Pacific Islander background, though race itself is not necessarily the main focus. However, in *The Collective*, the issue is front and center. Members of 3AC can't avoid their race, even if they want to. And racial issues—sometimes real and sometimes imagined—have great impact on their lives. In fact, part of the premise is just that—how race, particularly from the view of an artist, can't be escaped.



It's a topic that Lee, who has taught writing for years, says comes up often. On the one hand, it's a relief for many young artists to feel that they can write about what is important to them, which doesn't always mean writing about race. "But then others argue that avoiding a subject so obviously close to you and who you are means you are in denial and being cowardly," he says. In the book, he plays both sides of the argument. "The experience I am talking about [in *The Collective*] is a very special experience, that of being an Asian American artist," Lee says.

Since 2009, Lee has lived in Philadelphia, where he's the director of the MFA program at Temple University. During the academic year, he teaches. And in the

PHOTO COURTESY OF DON LEE

"I was dawdling, writing maybe one story a year. I never put a book together because I was afraid–what if I actually went for it and I failed?"

–Don Lee, whose first book was published when he was 41

summer, he writes and spends time outdoors. In fact, Lee does not seem much at all like what one imagines a 53-year-old professor to be. Along with biking and hiking, he's obsessed with windsurfing, and he plays alt-country songs on his guitar, which he learns by watching YouTube.

A self-proclaimed late bloomer, Lee published his first book at the age of 41. After earning his MFA from Emerson College in Boston, he spent 19 years editing the school's literary journal, *Ploughshares*. "I was dawdling, writing maybe one story a year," he says. "I never put a book together because I was afraid—what if I actually went for it and I failed?"

However, he didn't fail. He stuck it out, flirting only briefly with an alternate career (as a therapist), and enduring the concerns of friends and family members who wished he'd quit writing for a "real" job. The effects of his perseverance are a laundry list of awards. This January *The Collective* won the 2013 Asian/Pacific American Awards for Literature for adult fiction. His other novels and short stories have earned him a Pushcart Prize and O. Henry, American Book and Edgar awards.

Post-*Collective*, Lee plans to table ethnic identity issues for a while.

"I measure success by challenging myself," he says. "It's important to do something a little different each time." For now, he's focused on his fifth book, a short novel about an indie singer-songwriter. "After that, I'll work on my sixth book, and keep going for as long as I can."

GUERNICA / a magazine of art & politics

Don Lee: The Ethnic Literature Box

By Don Lee
June 25, 2012

Don Lee talks with Christine Lee Zilka about cover-art Orientalism, whether character heritage matters, and the improbability of becoming a writer.

Image from Flickr via fracking

When Don Lee's first book, a story collection called *Yellow* (http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/039332308o

/ref=as_li_tf_tl?ie=UTF8&tag=gueamagofarta-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=039323080) , came out in 2001, it heralded discussion and oftentimes controversy: He dared to step out of the box of the then-prevalent themes of immigration and identity. The new ways in which Lee represented Asian Americans was curious and inspiring to me as a writer. His characters were Asian American, and not necessarily heroes. This, I thought, is a brave writer.

Don Lee's growing body of work continues to edge into new worlds for Asian American literature, just as he has; a third-generation Korean American, his work at *Ploughshares* from 1988-2007 gave confidence to so many rejoicing APIA writers who had yet to see Asian Americans in mainstream lit mag editorial roles. He's a writer who refuses to fit into a mold. Since *Yellow*, Lee has continued to push boundaries in his work with great audacity. And his work has been awarded the American Book Award, the Edgar Award for Best First Novel, the Sue Kaufman Prize for First Fiction from the Academy of Arts and Letters, and the members choice award from the Asian American Writers Workshop, among many others.

Don Lee and I exchanged questions and answers via email on the eve of the release of his latest novel, *The Collective* (http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0393083217/ref=as_li_tf_tl?ie=UTF8&tag=gueamagofarta-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0393083217) . During the course of our interview, it became clear that he is conscious of his pioneering role and consequently, the responsibility of mentoring a generation of new writers.

—Christine Lee Zilka for *Guernica*

Guernica: You once said in an interview with *Kartika Review* (http://kartikareview.com/?portfolio=issue-02-spring-2008) that regarding Chang-rae Lee's *Aloft* (http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1594480702/ref=as_li_tf_tl?ie=UTF8&tag=gueamagofarta-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=1594480702) , "having that novel narrated by a sixty-year-old white guy was brave, brave, brave and [you] credit Chang-rae Lee with starting a mini-revolution," allowing "all of us to feel freer to slip away from writing about identity and ethnicity moving to whatever captures our fancy." What do you hope you'll do for other writers with your work? i.e., What is the legacy you hope to leave? What do you hope the next generation of writers will inherit from your peers?

Don Lee: I remember distinctly after a reading I gave years ago, a young fellow approached me, and he said, "Look, I'm Korean American and I want to be a writer, too. My question to you is, do I have to write about being Korean American?" And I told him, "No, because I'm doing that for you." What I meant was that for writers of my generation, no matter what we actually wrote, our books would always be discussed in the context of race, but hopefully future generations would be less burdened by such expectations.

That *Kartika* interview was back in 2008, and it seems we're still waiting for the revolution to happen. There are a few Asian American writers who have pulled away from focusing on identity in their books—Charles Yu, Ed Park, and Susan Choi come to mind—but it hasn't become a trend, not one that I've been able to discern. Could it be that a younger generation of writers are doing just that but

haven't been able to publish their books? That publishers, if they can't put authors into an ethnic literature box, aren't interested? Christ, I hope not.

I feel queasy about the idea of having non-Asians taking center stage in one of my books. I would feel guilty about it, as if I were trying to deny my ethnic heritage, even though this is precisely what I am suggesting we should be free to do.

G: The body of your work covers a lot of ground—I admire the fact that I can't anticipate your next book based on your previous books and that there is no "typical Don Lee" novel. And I am so glad you keep writing books that in and of themselves resist fans or bowls of rice or yards of silk or rice paddies or (you get the picture) as cover art. That said, do you experience pressure to write about a certain thing or place or person? How do you cope with that pressure to represent?

DL: You never saw all the cover art I ended up rejecting. All those kinds of Orientalisms were on proposed covers early on (curiously by designers who were Asian American themselves), and I finally put the kibosh on them, especially after having two books in a row (*Yellow* and *Country of Origin* (http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/039332706X/ref=as_li_tf_tl?ie=UTF8&tag=gueamagofarta-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=039332706X)) with a half-blurry Asiatic face on the covers.

But neither my editor at Norton, Alane Salierno Mason, nor my agent, Maria Massie, nor anyone else has ever pressured me to write a certain kind of book (although in grad school, I got suggestions that I should address the "Asian American experience" more, which I resisted for a long time, but that's a whole nother story). Mostly I have felt an internal pressure to make each book better than the last, and to do something different, something that will challenge and make me grow as a writer.

Regardless of what kind of book I produce, however, it does seem that the dialogue tends to revolve around representing some sort of Asian American zeitgeist, and, to be honest, I hate it, because our experiences are so individual, and it feels hypocritical and inane to try to speak for all Asian Americans.

G: In what direction would you like to see Asian American literature aim? And from where do you think this pressure to write a certain way, stems?

DL: I'd like to see us get to the point where Asian American authors can have Asian American

characters and a big deal isn't made about it, or at least so it's not the first thing mentioned. When I think of, say, Gary Shteyngart, Nicole Krauss, Michael Chabon, and Aimee Bender, I don't think of them as Jewish writers who write about the Jewish experience. I think of them as good writers who write interesting books, period.

But I have sometimes wondered how much of the ghettoization of Asian American writers has been self-inflicted. Maybe the onus is on us to branch out more from writing about race and identity, immigration and assimilation, or setting our stories in the ancient hinterlands of China or Japan or Korea. I think Kazuo Ishiguro, one of my heroes, is a good model. His best work has nothing to do with Japan or being a 1.5 Japanese Englishman.

I was bored silly in my engineering classes, and my freshman comp teacher suggested to me that I might give creative writing a whirl as an elective, I might enjoy it. That little offhand suggestion changed my life.

Still, as much as I admire Ishiguro, and as much as I laud Chang-rae Lee for what he did with *Aloft*, I feel queasy about the idea of having non-Asians taking center stage in one of my books. I would feel guilty about it, as if I were trying to deny my ethnic heritage, even though this is precisely what I am suggesting we should be free to do.

G: The characters (Joshua Yoon, Eric Cho, and Jessica Tsai) in *The Collective* stick to their guns and strive to become artists. It's amazing and delightful that three Asian American college students in the late 1980s don't become doctors or lawyers; I feel like we've lost so many potentially amazing creative writers to medicine or law. In what way does this bildungsroman challenge the status quo of art evading priority? Or challenge history? Are you investigating a "what if" scenario?

DL: I'm exploring more of a personal journey in the book, rather than trying to make a broad statement. It was completely improbable of me to become a writer. I mean, I started out as an engineering major at UCLA. Going in, I had no idea what to study. I was good in math, and I liked making things, and I was a bit of a dreamer. I had a vague plan of eventually getting a Ph.D. in physical oceanography and building and designing underwater submersibles. I was bored silly in my engineering classes, though, and the guy who was my freshman comp teacher, a TA whose name I unfortunately can't remember—Tom something—suggested to me that I might give creative writing a whirl as an elective, I might enjoy it. That little offhand suggestion changed my life. It wasn't that I loved writing so much; I loved the other students in the class. I felt I had finally found a group in

which I could belong—people with similar sensibilities, politics, ways of looking at the world. That carried through with my next group of friends in grad school (I think that's the true value of MFA programs, making friends who will sustain you through a lot of tough years after you graduate) and then with other writers and artists I knew in Cambridge. *The Collective* is a love letter to that period of my life, when I kept doubting my commitment to writing, when I nearly gave up, when my friends were the only reason I didn't. At the same time, I wanted to explore in *The Collective* all the issues implied in your questions: Where are we now as Asian American artists? What are our responsibilities and obligations in regard to race?

However, I wonder about your supposition about the status quo. In the last ten years or so, whenever visiting MFA programs to give readings, I have seen a substantial percentage of creative writing students who are Asian American. I don't perceive any wishful thinking about Asians going into the arts. They're doing it. Could the opposite be true? Could we be losing generations of potentially amazing doctors and lawyers to the arts?

G: How did you begin working on *The Collective*? At AWP, you said you take two years to write a novel, six months of which you take to just sketch the ideas. What was the initial cluster of ideas that brought about *The Collective*?

DL: I was working on another novel, which I eventually abandoned. The first flickers for *The Collective* in my Moleskine notebook are these lines: "They were all part of an Asian American artists collective. Or they were college friends. What happened to those dreams of youth?" Later on in the notebook, I have: "Don't be afraid, Don. Just write. Don't worry. Be bold." Immediately below that, I have: "I cannot believe how stupid some of these scenarios are. What the hell am I thinking?"

G: I love my Moleskine too, and I'm so inspired by the encouraging notes you send yourself–and also strangely reassured by your doubts, because in the end you had a novel to be proud of. At what point in writing *The Collective* did you find your doubts subsiding?

DL: My deadline for the final manuscript was September 1 of last year, and it wasn't until around mid-August that I finally felt I was starting to put it all together. A writer friend of mine read the manuscript and was very encouraging, and she gave me a couple of vital suggestions. However, she'd read the novel on her iPad while on vacation, and when she emailed me the notes she'd made on the iPad, we discovered they weren't accompanied with the passages she'd highlighted. So I had to guess which paragraphs or sections she was referring to, based on floating comments like "Well said!" and "Great desc" and "Lovely." But there were about four times when she wanted to know what the narrator Eric was thinking and feeling in the moment, and I knew which scenes she was alluding to, and she was exactly right. It was absolutely crucial to go into his head during those moments. Once I did, the novel felt fleshed out to near-completion.

G: After you've spent two years writing a novel, do you take time off?

DL: What happens after two years is usually six more months of revisions: first working through my

editor's notes, then the copyeditors', then going through three passes of proofs, in which I continue to want to make little revisions (to the frustration of the assistant editor, the saintly Denise Scarfi). Then there are months of production and marketing issues, like finalizing catalog copy and flap copy and cover design and press releases and arranging readings and promotion and interviews. I am constantly amazed how hard the people at Norton (and in publishing in general) work, even for someone like me, someone who's not a lead author. But this stuff consumes me to the extent that I can't begin another book right away. I would dearly love it if I could, if only to distract me from all the months of waiting for the book to come out and worrying about how it will be received.

G: What do you do when you can't make something work?

DL: I panic. I agonize that maybe I've shot my wad and I'll never write or finish another book. That's what happened after I abandoned that other novel. It really felt to me like my career was over. But then it was a matter of trusting the generative process, letting the ideas come, even if they didn't seem related or to make much sense. That's the challenge and satisfaction of writing novels, taking these disparate elements and trying to make them cohere.

G: Who was the first writer who really bowled you over?

DL: There have been quite a few, mainly novelists I read in college, but I think the writer who made the biggest impression on me came later, in my twenties, and it was Richard Yates. Just before going to grad school in Boston, I was browsing in a used bookstore and picked up *Eleven Kinds of Loneliness* (http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0099518570/ref=as_li_tf_tl?ie=UTF8&tag=gueamagofarta-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0099518570) , never having heard of Yates before. After that, I read pretty much everything he'd ever written. I knew Yates lived in Boston, and it became a fantasy of mine to meet him someday. On my second night in the city, I happened to see him in a bar and introduced myself. I saw and talked to him on at least a monthly basis for the next few years, and what I learned dispelled any romantic notions I had of what constituted a writer's life. Yet what stuck with me was that, despite his alcoholism and psychotic breaks and tragic, myriad insecurities, he wrote. That's what he did: he wrote.

G: How does your past work as an editor and your current work as a teacher inform your work as a writer?

DL: On a technical level, my line-editing skills have been helpful in (and honed by) all of those functions. In a way, I think editing is very similar to teaching. You have the same objectives: to find new writers, get their stories to be the best they can be, try to present them well and further their careers. It used to be that when conferring with students, I never talked about my personal experiences as a writer, never referred to any of my own work, thinking it would be narcissistic to do so, but I've discovered that little anecdotes about process or publishing are exactly what students hunger for, so I share more of that now.

Guernica and the Asian American Writers Workshop (http://aaww.org/) will co-host a reading with Don Lee and Aimee Phan on July 26.

Christine Lee Zilka is the editor-at-large at Kartika Review. *Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in journals and anthologies such as* ZYZZYVA, Verbsap, Yomimono, *and* Men Undressed: Women Authors Write About Male Sexual Experience. She was awarded a residency at Hedgebrook, placed as a finalist in Poets and Writers Magazine's Writers Exchange Contest in 2007, and received an honorable mention in Glimmer Train's Fiction Open in 2009. She earned her undergraduate degree from UC Berkeley and MFA in Creative Writing from Mills College. In addition to writing short stories, she has a novel in progress.

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Asian American Writers' Workshop Journeys of Recovery Salon

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On July 26, the Asian American Writers' Workshop and Guernica will co-sponsor the second installment of the AAWW's Bricolage series, featuring Pauline Chen, Don Lee, and Aimee Phan.

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Kaya Genç: Ian McEwan's Sweet Tooth

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Author Don Lee Addresses The Young Asian American Experience

20:15

July 24, 2012

This article is more than 10 years old.

Author Don Lee at Here & Now studios at WBUR in Boston. (Jesse Costa/Here & Now)

If you're Asian-American, have you suffered stupid questions like: What's a good place to

eat in Chinatown? Do you know Kung Fu? Do you eat dog meat? The perceptions, stereotypes and realities of three Asian-Americans play out in Don Lee's new novel, "The Collective." Here & Now's Robin Young sat down with Lee, part of the conversation is transcribed below, followed by an excerpt from the book.

- **Harvard Book Store:** Don Lee Reading Tuesday, July 24

In your book, Eric, Joshua and Jessica all meet at a small liberal arts college in Minnesota. Eric, an aspiring author, Jessica, an artist, Joshua, a writer. All three of your characters are considered Asian American by others looking at them, but in fact they are very different.

Yeah, it's a strange and really broad rubric, especially these days when you include South Asians, Indians, and Pakistanis as well. It's an odd category, and I think that it is one that's probably too broad.

Eric is third generation Korean American. He grew up in Mission Viejo and thinks of himself as American. Joshua was abandoned at a Korean orphanage and adopted by Massachusetts intellectuals. Jessica is a second generation Taiwanese who wants to be an artist. There are similarities in the way the world sees them but many differences in who they are.

I think that its something that most people who aren't Asian American don't really recognize in terms of generational differences. I'm third generation Korean American and mostly from California, although my father was in the state department, so I bounced around a lot oversees as a kid. But really didn't think about my ethnicity until I moved to Boston back in 1984 to attend graduate school at Emerson College. It was only here that my questions about identity really arose, because here it seemed there was a kind of segregation in terms of race. People did

actually say things to me. I had these encounters that were shocking to me.

Like what?

Just walking through a crowd of people, there were a bunch of guys and one of them said to me, directly to my face he said, "Did you know it's National Hate Chinese Week?" Things like that happen, and coming from California, where you have so many Asian Americans, you know, I never expected that.

So that goes to some of the racism that the characters see and feel. But what about who gets to write about race? When they're in this school in Minnesota, Joshua excoriates a young white woman because she wrote a story based in China. "You can't write about the Asian experience unless you are Asian," he says. What are you saying about who gets to write the story?

I think issue of cultural appropriation, in terms of writing, is very interesting. It's one that's heatedly debated. Here, I'm more interested in what's happening within Asian American writers and artists. And I think when we're going through this transitional period, and we're all asking ourselves several questions. You know, if you're an Asian American writer, do you always have to have race as your subject? Do you have to have all your characters Asian American? If you don't, is that race betrayal? I mean, if you keep on doing that, are you limiting yourself, are you ghettoizing yourself and your audience, or even perpetuating stereotypes? And so these are, you know, the arguments that they have within the collective here.

You're right in the middle of that debate because you're writing a book that's filled with Asian American characters. Is that what you think you should do?

From a personal point of view, I think that we should be able to do anything that we want to. And, actually, I think that that carries through as well to white writers. If they want to write from a different race's point of view, that's fine with me too.

And I've written stories about a chair maker, a sculptor. I'm not a chair maker or sculptor, but I believe if I do enough research and am true to those characters, then I have a right to do that. But there are many people who would adamantly disagree with that.

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

Euan Kerr ST. PAUL, Minn. December 31, 2012 2:11 PM

Author Don Lee, shown in a 2008 file photo, said his latest novel, "The Collective," is his most personal. Lee, the director of the MFA program at Temple University in Philadelphia, taught at Macalester College in 2007 and 2008. MPR Photo/Euan Kerr

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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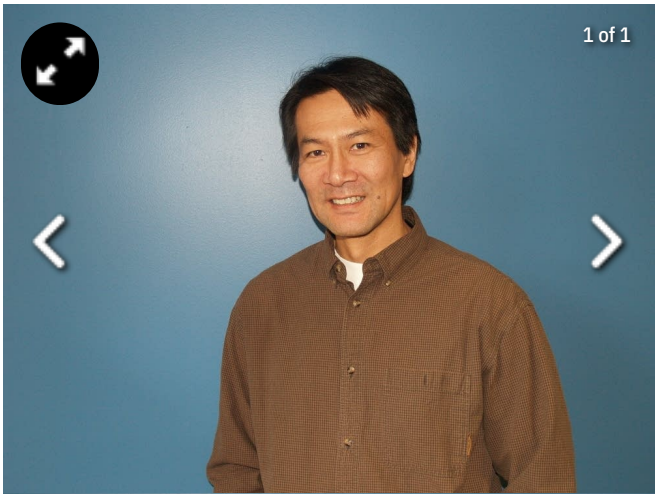

Author Don Lee, shown in a 2008 file photo, said his latest novel, "The Collective," is his most personal. Lee, the director of the MFA program at Temple University in Philadelphia, taught at Macalester College in 2007 and 2008. **MPR Photo/Euan Kerr**

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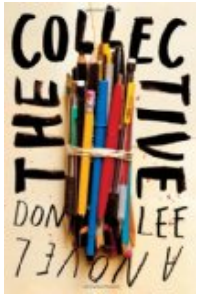
Terry Hong

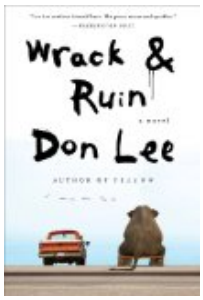
features

An Interview with Don Lee



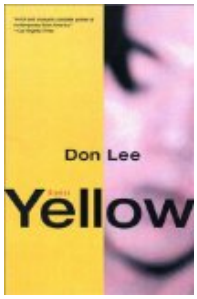
Don Lee is definitely a good news-bad news sort of guy, albeit all in the same breath.

Good news: he's not going to Texas this summer, because his fourth and latest book, *The Collective*, is published this month and he's going on a book tour so he can meet his waiting readers across the country. Bad news: he's not going to Texas this summer -- specifically to Marfa, one of his favorite places to write -- because he's going on a book tour so he can meet his waiting readers across the country.



Good news: as soon as he gets back, he's planning to start another novel. Worst bad news: as soon as he gets back, he has to get working on another novel and start the whole cycle of worry all over again.

In spite of all that neurotic handwringing, Lee has figured out how to deliver with every book. Lee the writer arrived pretty much fully formed in 2001with his quirky debut story collection, *Yellow*, which was populated by the inhabitants of fictional Rosarito Bay, a northern California seaside town not unlike Half Moon Bay. His memorable cast of characters was so real, I was convinced I knew at least a few of them (I lived in that area for a few years). His many awards -- that began with the Sue Kaufman Prize for First Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters -- proved well-deserved; Lee's steadily garnered continuous kudos with the novels that followed, *Country of Origin* (2004) about the disappearance of an African American hapa woman in Japan, and *Wrack and Ruin* (2008) which returns to Lee's fictional Rosarito Bay of



Yellow to the unexpected, wacky reunion of two very different brothers.

The Collective is, undoubtedly, his most personal novel, although don't let the overlaps with his real life fool you -- Lee's an incorrigible storyteller. 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. No spoilers (this happens in the second paragraph): Joshua's violent, shocking suicide opens Lee's third novel.

Burning first question: I have to start backward just to be contrary since I leaked the beginning. So Joshua's first book, which gets glowing reviews, is called *Upon the Shore* and it's set in Korea's Cheju Island. And, of course, his (chosen) last name is Yoon. Immediately when I saw that title in your *Collective*, I thought of *Once the Shore*, the much lauded debut title from Paul Yoon, which is set on an imaginary Korean island not unlike Cheju. Then I noticed that Paul Yoon gets a nod in your acknowledgments so obviously you must have a personal relationship with him. *Upon the Shore, Once the Shore*, Joshua Yoon, Paul Yoon? Any correlation intended? You would *not* want to wish Joshua's career and life on Paul, would you?

I'm good friends with Paul Yoon, and it was all an inside joke, but now you've outed us, dammit! I first met Paul in Boston. His girlfriend, the writer Laura van den Berg, was my student at Emerson, and then in 2008, the three of us became close when we were all living near Harvard Square for the summer, within blocks of each other. They've become two of my dearest friends. Paul is famously reclusive and private. For a while, Laura maintained a hilarious fake Twitter account for him, @No1Hermit (he made her take it down eventually). So to needle him, I initially used the title *Upon the Shore* in a short story of mine, referring to a cheesy fictitious film, and then decided to use the title and his last name in *The Collective* for Joshua, and it grew from there. But no, Paul is not at all like Joshua. He's a strangely upbeat person. I'm much more like Joshua than he is -- morose and prone to depression and pessimistic by nature.

Now that you've 'fessed up to your resemblance to Joshua, I must ask the next obvious question: how much of *The Collective* is real? I know writing in first person sometimes can bring up that sort of question, and this is your first book in first person, right? Certainly the details of Macalaster College are authentic as you were there for a year teaching, and you were also an editor at *Ploughshares* for years and years before your Midwest gig. You don't necessarily have to reveal details -- although you're more than welcome to if you want to! -- but maybe you might share a few general overlaps to real life?

Yup, first thing I've ever written in first person. That was the challenge I posed for myself with *The Collective*. With each book, I try to do something very different, both technically and tonally, which is not, actually, a good career move for a writer. It's easier on everyone -- booksellers, publishers, readers, agents, reviewers -- if your books follow a somewhat familiar trajectory. It's confusing to people if you don't, I've learned.

There are quite a few autobiographical elements in the book -- a few of my romantic disasters and a lot of the staging, like the old *Ploughshares* office in Watertown, which was the shithole I describe for *Palaver* -- but not as many as you may think. I didn't hang out with many Asian Americans in Boston, because often I was the sole non-white person in the room when I went to literary events. I was never in an artists' collective, though later on I had friends in the Dark Room Collective [founded in 1988 in Boston by a group of established and emerging African American poets]. I never got caught up in any of the racial controversies that are portrayed (I based the rigmarole with Jessica and the Cambridge Arts Council on my friend Hans Evers's experience way back in 1994,

but embellished it with a racial component). I'll say this, though: this is my most personal book yet. A lot of what these characters feel, I have felt acutely at various points of my life. But most of the main actions or events in the book are made up.

I loved Joshua's obsession with Haruki Murakami the runner... I'm still chuckling at the oddest moments over the "Is that him?" reference. I myself am a running-Murakami groupie, that is, I've so enjoyed running with a Murakami title stuck in my ears. So does this mean you're a runner, a Murakami groupie, or both?

Both. I was a real Murakami junkie for a while, and *The Wind-up Bird Chronicle* remains one of my favorite books. I used to run every day along the Charles River in Boston for something like fifteen years, but eventually my knees gave out, so I started biking. Man, I miss running, the simplicity and accessibility and meditative quality of it.

The only time I caught sight of Murakami was at MIT, where he was giving a reading. There were no seats left, and the guards started herding the people who were standing, including me, out of the auditorium, so I never got to see him read, but I veered down a hallway and passed right by him as he waited to enter.

We published a story of his in *Ploughshares,* but I only dealt with his agent in New York, his assistant in Tokyo, and his translator, Jay Rubin, at Harvard. But the assistant asked for five extra copies of the issue to be shipped to Minami Aoyama, and it made me happy to imagine Murakami thumbing through them.

I've sort of skirted around the main question: how did *The Collective* come about?

The book arose from a false start. The original novel I'd planned was going to be called *Every Now and Then,* and it was going to be in first person, narrated by a suicidal, drug-addicted, female Korean American poet amputee in a wheelchair who's stalking her Cambridge neighbor. I told this recently to the sales director at Norton, and I could see his face fall in abject horror with the mere idea that he might have been asked to try to sell a book like that. But obviously I ended up dumping that particular novel, an agonizing decision for me at the time, since I was pretty far into it. I just wasn't feeling it, though. I had been fighting it all the way. I knew I had a structurally sound idea for a book, but I finally decided it wasn't a novel I wanted to write.

So I started from scratch again. The only thing that survived from *Every Now and Then* was the poet's suicide attempt, which became the opening of *The Collective,* in which Joshua successfully kills himself in the same manner. (Four writers I knew, not close friends but acquaintances, killed themselves within a year and a half, and obviously that had an effect on me.) But what impelled me this time around was the thought of friendships, how they form and wane, the memory of all these great friends -- all writers and artists -- I'd had in my twenties and thirties in Cambridge. I missed those friends, I missed Cambridge, and I wanted to write a love letter to that period of my life, to all the starving artists I'd known.

So whose "side" are you on? Militant Joshua who won't let you ignore race in the creation of art, or Esther who believes ethnicity shouldn't be the determining factor of artistic expression?

I side more with Esther, although you wouldn't think so reading this novel. But you know, I go back and forth on the issue of focusing on race as a subject, as you can see from my books. Sometimes I address it full on, sometimes hardly at all. In a way, *Wrack and Ruin* might have been a reaction to some of the questions I was asked when promoting *Country of Origin*. To wit: one interviewer asked me why I thought Koreans as an immigrant group seemed to do better economically in the U.S. than other groups. That was bizarre to me. I mean, *Country of Origin* wasn't even set in the U.S.; it takes place in Tokyo in 1980. How, then, did I become a socioeconomist specializing in U.S. immigration? I felt very uncomfortable being put in that position, being asked to speak as an expert on all things Asian American.

The Collective became a debate with myself about the issue, and the debate manifested itself through my characters, who ask: Do Asian American artists always have to have race as their primary subject? Do they always have to make their characters Asian American? Would it be race betrayal if they don't? Doesn't limiting yourself to the issue of race ghettoize yourself, or even perpetuate stereotypes?

My answers: No. No. No. Maybe. And I'll also say that this will likely be the last time I address race so explicitly in a book. I think I'm done with it.

What's different in *The Collective*, I think, is that the external incidents don't matter as much as how the characters react to them. (That sounds facile. All fiction should do that.) But the book's less about racism and more about how Asian Americans wrestle with internal obligations about race.

You've written short stories, a mystery, a comedy, and now a *bildungsroman*, more or less. What's next?

My next challenge to myself is to write a short novel (a friend of mine used to refer to her project at the time as SBN, Short Bad Novel, and I referred to my project then, my first novel, as TFN, The Fucking Novel). I think there's a real art to writing something that length, say less than 200 pages, and I don't know if I'm capable of it. All my novels thus far have been over 300 pages. I'm not sure what it'll be about yet, other than that it'll have a hapa alt-folk-country singer-songwriter. It might also be about sustainable building and food and fracking. Or not, since those subjects might push the book over 200 pages.

You started your literary career with short stories... not to play favorites at all, but I confess that *Yellow* sets my heart aflutter. Think you might be writing another collection anytime soon?

I've written just four stories since *Yellow,* which came out eleven years ago, so another collection won't be in the offing for quite a while. To tell you the truth, I just don't think in short stories anymore. People always used to say that my stories were novelistic. Often I tried to pack whole lifetimes in them. I've found that the novel is a more natural medium for me, with that sort of inclination, allowing a larger scope.

Frankly, writing novels is also more practical for me right now, since these days most of my writing time is limited to summers. I generally take two years or so to write a novel: six months figuring out the story and doing research, a year for the first draft, then six more months doing revisions. After that, there are up to six more months of revision with my editor at Norton, Alane Mason. A story usually takes me at least three months to write, but then I have to start all over again and come up with another story idea, whereas I can immerse myself in a novel for the duration. I really hate starting anew.

Do you have a different writing process for different genres?

Not so much a different process as a different mindset. A story is very finite. You can see the ending, and you can write a first draft relatively quickly toward that ending. The pleasure then is in the revision. I remember for the last story I wrote, I tinkered with a single line for four hours, and I thought, "What a luxury this is, a joy, to indulge in language at this minute level." There's much less anxiety in writing a story. If it's not quite working, you can set it aside for a while. There's no shame if you do.

Writing a novel, on the other hand, is rife with anxiety, from start to finish. At least for me. There's an enormous amount at stake -- two, three, four, five years of your life. If you fail, it's absolutely devastating. When beginning a novel, I worry that I might have characters and a situation, but not a semblance of a plot – something to propel the thing. In the middle, I worry that I might have a plot, but it's too thin or ludicrous, and I don't have an ending yet. Near the end, I worry that maybe the whole fucking thing was misconceived to begin with. I never stop worrying, I never enjoy any part of writing a novel, until I'm in the last stages of revision, when a few tweaks seem to bring everything together ("seem" is the operative word there). I doubt myself every step of the way, and I have to push myself to somehow continue without getting completely mired in paralysis and self-loathing. You

have to have faith that it'll all work out in the end, but it's a constant mindfuck.

Well... so now we know what you're like as a person: "morose and prone to depression and pessimistic by nature." You've just confessed you're a paralyzed, self-loathing writer. Now that we got all that out of the day, dare I ask... so what are you like as a teacher? What might your best students say? What might your worst students add?

I think the students who like me would say that what I do well is create a very laid-back, non-combative atmosphere in workshops. The students who don't like me would probably cite the very same reason.

In Temple's MFA program, where I've been for three years now, what I really love is what they call "Manuscript Tutorial." You work with a second-year student in one-on-one meetings all semester, which allows us to do two things you usually can't do in MFA programs: focus intensely on revisions of stories, and work on novels.

As a professor, I think I'm best teaching students how to become better line editors of their own manuscripts, which is a skill I picked up at *Ploughshares*.

Do you miss that high-power editing -- the nineteen years at *Ploughshares*? I assume it was *nothing* like Eric's experience at *Palaver*!

DeWitt Henry, the founding editor of *Ploughshares,* was nothing like *Palaver*'s Evan Paviromo, that's for sure, but when I started as the office manager and then the managing editor, I did everything that Eric does in the book -- all the manual labor that's involved in what's called, ironically and hilariously, fulfillment. Eventually we had enough money to farm that shit out. What I miss most about the job is being a jack-of-all-trades. Even though we quadrupled the budget while I was there, we remained a shoestring operation. So I had to figure out ways to streamline things. I programmed databases and did all the typesetting and the bookkeeping and the spreadsheets and created these elaborate systems so we could save time and not have to spend money on outsourcing. I was constantly learning things there. There'd be an inefficiency, and I'd have to devise a way to fix that inefficiency. It appealed to the DIY geek side of me.

What I don't miss is the impression of being a high-powered editor. I'm the type of person who wants respect, who wants to be very good at his job, but who doesn't care about power. That's not what drives me at all. I don't give a damn about hierarchy or being prominent or the one who makes the decisions, being the so-called gatekeeper. And in fact that's what I hated about editing *Ploughshares* (well, actually, what I really hated was dealing with petty college administrators who treated us like shit, but that's another story), how many people viewed me that way, and the enmity it generated.

When I went to the AWP conference, there were two ways people approached me. One was, "Oh, you're Don Lee! I love *Ploughshares*! Can I send you a story sometime?" The other was, "Oh, you're Don Lee. You rejected a story of mine last week" (as if I read every submission). The sycophancy was tolerable, yet it was a drag, all those years, having thousands of people automatically assuming I was an asshole.

Just in case you were wondering, I've never sent you a story, and I never ever plan to! And I promise to call you names only to your face; the good stuff I'll whisper behind your back. So *Ploughshares* for you -- been there, done that, moving on... now what's *TINGE* -- Temple University's online literary journal you founded two years ago -- like?

The major difference for me is that I'm not the editor, just the advisor. It's edited by the graduate students in the MFA program, and I lucked out having an incredibly capable young woman, Sonja Crafts, serve as the editor for the first two years. She has exactly the right qualities to be a good editor -- namely, being obsessive about the details, a perfectionist.

My only responsibilities were the design of the website and the setup of the editorial staff. Well, maybe some procedures as well (I teach a course on editing in conjunction with the journal). I worked with a designer in North Carolina named Randy Skidmore, and although the process was arduous, I had a lot of fun getting back into the nitty-gritty of website design and layout, of conceptualizing a brand-new journal.

You've had a rather peripatetic life -- Japan, Korea, California, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Michigan… and now Philadelphia. Do you think you might settle for a while? I hear you're not exactly in love with Philly (in spite of the amazing gelato there on Walnut Street). Do you think you'll stay? Maybe as long as you can escape most summers?

I don't think it's so much Philly as this juncture in my life. At my age (fifty-two), it's hard to establish new friendships, people you can do things and go to events with, talk to on a regular basis. Everyone's married, has kids, busy. I'm single (look, I'm fucked up, all right?), so I'm alone much of the time, always feeling somewhat unmoored and adrift. I'm realizing I'd feel this way in any city, and perhaps I should give Philly a chance. A lot of people ardently love the place. But the thing is, I've found as I've gotten older that I like small towns, even ones as small as Marfa, Texas, which has a population of 2,000. Of course, Marfa is an anomaly, an oasis for artists in the high desert. It's very much like living on an island. I've spent the last two summers there, the first through a Lannan Residency. Maybe the solution, as you suggest, is simply to go to Marfa every summer.

What are you most looking forward to on this latest upcoming book tour? What are you dreading most?

Oh, I am dreading everything. There's nothing I'm looking forward to. Even when things go well on tours (the book's reviewed well, decent audiences show up for readings, there's press coverage, sales are respectable), it's still awful for someone like me, a self-flagellating worrywart. But increasingly, with the way the book business is going, the chances of things going well are slim. I have felt a doom and gloom about *The Collective* for months now. This is exactly what I despise about writing books -- publishing them. I want them to come out, I want people to read them and like them, but 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. I just want it to be over with so I can move on. But then, alas, I'll have to start another novel.

And thank god we all have that to look forward to!

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

The L Magazine

BOOKS

The L Mag Questionnaire for Writer Types: Don Lee

Posted by Mark Asch on Wed, Jul 25, 2012 at 11:19 AM

***Don Lee** is the author of a collection of short stories and three novels, the most recent of which is* **The Collective**. *He's in town to read at the **Asian American Writers' Workshop** this Thursday evening.*

For our readers who may not be familiar with your work, what's the most accurate thing someone else has said about it?
Tim Rutten, a reporter from The Los Angeles *Times*, when he was interviewing me about my collection *Yellow*, said he was interested in my stories because the characters resembled Asian Americans he actually knew—everyday people—an approach he rarely saw represented in contemporary fiction at the time. This isn't to say my characters are normal (whatever that means). Characters need flaws to fuel drama, after all. But they're far from stereotypical.

What have you read/watched/listened to/looked at/ate recently that will permanently change our readers' lives for the better?
Here's what immediately comes to mind: The novel *Stoner* by John Williams. The film *After the Wedding* by Susanne Bier. The album *Gentle Spirit* by Jonathan Wilson. Korean fried chicken and Ines Rosales Sweet Olive Oil Tortas.

Whose ghostwritten celebrity tell-all (or novel) would you sprint to the store to buy (along with a copy of *The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius* so that the checkout clerk doesn't look at you screwy)?
I'd get books by Kelly Slater, Tiger Woods, and Roger Federer. I'm a surfing fan and all-around sports nut.

Have you ever been a Starving Artist, and did it make you brilliant, or just hungry?
For four years after grad school, I taught an average of eight classes a year as an adjunct while working part-time at the journal *Ploughshares*. I made less than $17,000 total a year and didn't have health benefits. I never went to a dentist during that time, and visited a clinic just once to get crutches when I broke my foot running. Poverty wasn't inspirational.

What would you characterize as an ideal interaction with a reader?
To be showered with unadulterated praise. To witness fainting and swooning in my presence. No, actually, I think first and foremost a writer's interaction with a reader needs to be based on what can be transmitted from the printed page to the reader's imagination—operable at a complete remove. If that doesn't connect, everything else is a moot point.

Have you ever written anything that you'd like to take back?
No, you have to take ownership over everything you've done. Could I have written things better or differently? Sure, of course. There are certain endings to short stories, for example, I'd like to revise. But I did the best I could at the time.

Tags: The L Magazine Questionnaire for Writer Types (TM), Don Lee, Yellow, Asian American Writers

« Tonight at SummerScreen: Dirty Danc... | *Gay Weddings Have Made the City Lot... »*

Hyphen Magazine

hyphenmagazine.com

Interview with Author Don Lee

original (http://www.hyphenmagazine.com/blog/archive/2012/07/interview-author-don-lee)

Photo of the author by Melissa Frost

Don Lee writes for Don Lee.

This may sound like quite the self-important statement to make, but Lee asserts it as fact, not bravado.

After all, Lee points out, writing is by nature a very individualized practice.

But what drives the tale of his latest novel -- his third, after 2008's *Wrack and Ruin* (http://www.amazon.com/Wrack-Ruin-Novel-Don-Lee/dp/0393334759/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1342115805&sr=1-1&keywords=wrack+and+ruin/hyphenmagazin-20), and his 2005 debut, *Country of Origin* (http://www.amazon.com/Country-Origin-Novel-Don-Lee/dp/039332706X/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1342115827&sr=1-1&keywords=country+of+origin/hyphenmagazin-20) -- is actually an homage to what happens when writers and creative minds come

together, and to the friendships and rivalries that result.

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), due out July 16, follows three friends -- Joshua Yoon, Eric Cho and Jessica Tsai -- who find common ground in their desire to create and learn and grow as artists of different mediums. The trio creates the 3AC (Asian American Artists Collective) while attending Macalester College. Through the narrator Eric's eyes, they weave their way into the writing and artistic community in Boston, learning much about identity and integrity along the way. There's sex, manipulation and abounding egos -- a recipe for any great story -- and, most poignantly, nuanced depictions of race without hammering the point over the head.

We asked Lee, a third-generation Korean American, to speak a bit about his own journey in writing, the implied responsibility of Asian American writers to bring ethnicity into the equation, and the best music to listen to whilst whittling out a novel (hint: alt-country music).

Do you think there's an expectation for Asian American authors to write about Asian Americans and the APA experience exclusively like several of your novel's characters initially question?

I do remember when I was in grad school, I got a lot of shit that I should write about the "Asian American experience," which I resented like hell. Let's say a writer is a 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.

Chang-rae Lee was the real revolutionary. For his third novel, *Aloft*, he had a 60-year-old white guy living on Long Island as his narrator. That took guts. I think we'll soon see other Asian American writers pulling away in droves from having the APA experience as their subject. Quite a few writers like Ed Park, Susan Choi, and Sabrina Murray already have. And I almost certainly will, too.

You have such well-developed characters in "The Collective" -- most especially Joshua, who seems to have so many different layers of feelings and hurt that unravel through the course of the novel. Were there any particular literary figures that you looked to for inspiration in shaping his character? Or was it more a conglomerate of people from real life?

More the latter. You know, in every group, there's always a leader, someone dynamic and larger than life. I was never one of those people. But I had several close friends who were, and what I always learned was that they were often delusional, and congenital liars, and their dynamism was driven not by confidence but by extreme insecurity. All of which makes people like that wonderful characters for a novel.

What came to you first when brainstorming and writing the book? What was the development process like as you continued to write?

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 blasé decision, but really it threw me into a deep 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.

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 other types of art do not?

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.

What's your own personal writing regimen like? Do you have a good go-to cure for writer's block?

I used to write in longhand -- that's how old I am -- with a black Pilot Razor Point and narrow-ruled yellow legal pads, but halfway through my third book, I started writing on my laptop while listening to my iPod, and I haven't looked back. When I'm in full first-draft mode, I aim for two pages a day, on weekends and during the summer.

I have a great trick for writer's block. You get a kitchen timer and set it for 20 minutes. Once you press the start button, you cannot email, surf the Web, answer a call, cannot get up to use the bathroom or fetch a glass of water. During those 20 minutes, you must sit at your desk and not move, and you can either write or stare into space. Usually you end up writing, you're so bored, and usually you'll go beyond 20 minutes. When the timer rings, you can do whatever you want, but once you set it again, you've got to stay put.

***The Collective* seems rooted in the theme of camaraderie, and what it means to have a community to learn and grow from. What's been the most memorable criticism you've ever gotten for your work from your peers?**

My writer friends are very supportive. That's not to say they softball their criticism. Somewhere along the way, I learned that it's best to trade manuscripts with people who are at similar points in your careers. When someone is above or below you, weird personal agendas can intrude. But it's so important to have other writers and artists around you. No one else can really understand what the hell you're trying to do with your life.

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 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.

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

Oh, definitely this one. It's not exactly autobiographical, except for some of the narrator's romantic debacles, but it's very personal to me, delving into all 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 grad programs in psychology, thinking I should become a therapist or counselor and stop chasing this quixotic dream of becoming a writer. No one was trying to convince me otherwise.

The challenge is different now. I think once you're published, each new book becomes more difficult, mostly because you're reflecting on disappointments: you never hit the big time, your books aren't selling, you're not getting awards, no one loves you. Being a midlist writer is the most tenuous position in publishing these days. Trying to sell your third or fourth or fifth book is infinitely harder than selling a debut. So there's a lot at stake. You question why you're writing, what you're trying to accomplish as a writer. But eventually you have to say fuck it, I'm going to return to the purity of my original vision and write what I'm moved to write, and if no one wants to read it, so be it.

Who are you reading now and who inspires you?

I've been reading some short novels, since that's what I'm planning to do with my next book: *Train Dreams* (http://www.amazon.com/Train-Dreams-Novella-Denis-Johnson/dp/1250007658/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1342122957&sr=1-1&keywords=train+dreams/hyphenmagazin-20) by Denis Johnson and *Running Away* (http://www.amazon.com/Running-Away-Netherlandic-Belgian-Literature/dp/156478567X/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1342122994&sr=1-1&keywords=running+away+jean/hyphenmagazin-20) 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.

Don Lee will participate in a "salon-style multimedia show-and-tell" and share his writing process for *The Collective* at the Asian American Writers' Workshop on Thursday, July 26 (http://aaww.org/curation/bricolage-journeys-of-recovery/).

***

Joyce Chen is a second-generation Taiwanese American journalist and current

multimedia editor at the New York Daily News, where she covers viral videos, recaps "The Bachelorette" and wades her way through all things entertainment and gossip - with tongue firmly in cheek, of course. She originally hails from Cerritos, Calif. and graduated with degrees in print journalism and psychology from the University of Southern California, where she was previously the editor-in-chief of the Daily Trojan. Her writings have been published in People magazine, Los Angeles magazine and the Los Angeles Daily News.

Original URL:
http://www.hyphenmagazine.com/blog/archive/2012/07/interview-author-don-lee

Bloom Magazine

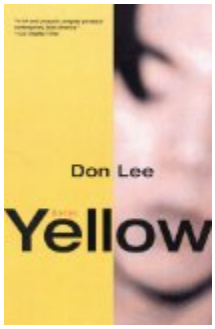
Q&A with Don Lee

Posted on May 29, 2013 **by** BLOOM Leave a comment

by Terry Hong

With his eyes and body still "bleary from post-windsurfing and traveling," Don Lee nonetheless graciously agrees to be grilled yet again – we're going on a decade-plus of various interviews through four books! He's tired, he's rambling, but he's always entertaining … and once more he's game to talk about all manner of things, from writing and ethnicity, to blooming late and Eeyore-style lamentations.

Terry Hong: With all that literary editing, mentoring, teaching, how come you didn't publish until you were 41?



Don Lee: Oh, I could give you all kinds of excuses: that I was busy with *Ploughshares* (true), that each short story took me a long time to write (very true), that I never really planned or wanted to publish a book (sort of true), that I was happy writing stories once a year or so and getting them into journals (almost true), but frankly, the real reason was that I was scared shitless. I think unconsciously I didn't want to lay it all out on the line and try to publish a

book and then fail. It was easier not to try.

But then I turned 38, and I decided I'd really like to have a book, one book, before I turned 40. I didn't want to end up thinking for the rest of my life about what could have been, and become bitter. So I wrote two new stories, revised a bunch of old stories to form a collection, and set about finding an agent to represent me, all of which took over a year and a half. Whereas the goal originally (and unrealistically) had been to publish a book by the time I turned 40, the new goal became to sell the book by then, and I did: W. W. Norton offered me a book contract the week I turned 40, and *Yellow* was published the following year [in 2001].

TH: Okay, so what prompted you to write that first story? And how did that first story eventually morph into the determination to become a writer for real?

DL: Unlike many authors, I didn't know I wanted to be a writer at 7 years old or whatnot. I didn't know what I'd do with my life. I was, however, a tinkerer as a kid. I would take apart things, make things. My bedroom was scattered with detritus —tools, wires, glue, balsa wood, batteries, a soldering iron, capacitors, motors, model cars and planes. When it came time to go to college, my quixotic plan was to get my mechanical engineering degree and then a Ph.D. in physical oceanography and build and pilot underwater submersibles (I watched a lot of **Jacques Cousteau** as a kid). I was a dreamer. I didn't write a short story until my sophomore year at UCLA, after a comp teacher told me I had a flair for words and might enjoy taking a creative writing class.

TH: And now four books—and oh so many awards!!—later, are you still scared shitless? Or are you finally resting a bit on your laurels?

DL: Naw, I'm still a tortured soul who never allows himself to feel good about his accomplishments, who doesn't really believe he's accomplished anything. And yes, each time I start another book, I am petrified that I won't be able to pull it off and finish it, and if I can, that I won't be able to sell it, and if I can, that no one will like it. Why do I keep doing it, then? Because it's

BLOOM

Q&A with Don Lee

Don Lee's Pure Stories

The Vintage Years: How the Older Brain Both Facilitates and Benefits from Fine Arts Expression

In His Own Words: Gaston Leroux

Gaston Leroux: A Man of Heaven and Earth

Experience Required: Back to School

Q&A With Nicole Wolverton

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Despite his occasional "doom and gloom," novelist and short-story writer Don Lee has done very well for himself. bit.ly/172fYPC 15 hours ago

Terry Hong gives you two names to add to your summer reading list: Don Lee and Paul Yoon. bit.ly/172fYPC 16 hours ago

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a challenge, and I'm compelled to do it, and I love being inside the process of writing a novel, of thinking about it all the time and figuring out structure and motifs and themes and connections. In a way, I'm still a tinkerer, building things with words.

TH: So you've done short stories, a mystery, dysfunctional family comedy, and an epic *bildungsroman*. We know how *Yellow* came to be … how about *Country of Origin*?

DL: Given my background [of international moves], I was fascinated by the milieu of foreign service officers and expatriates. Originally, I was going to write a story only about Tom, the hapa junior foreign service officer. But while I had a situation, I didn't have a plot to drive the story forward. The breakthrough came when I heard about a young Englishwoman who went missing, who had been a hostess in Tokyo. And I knew from my past that one of the duties of a vice consul in consular services is to take care of the welfare and whereabouts of their citizens. So then I had my story.

TH: … and *Wrack and Ruin*?

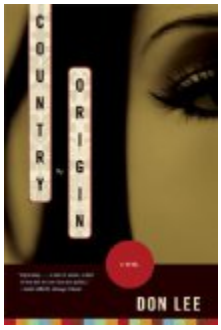
DL: After all the research I did for *Country of Origin*, I wanted to do something simpler, and going back to Rosarita Bay *seemed* simple to me at the time, since I'd made up the town. But I ended up doing quite a bit of research on various topics anyway for that book, especially about organic farming. I read somewhere that only three things grow in that area of California: artichokes, pumpkins, and Brussels sprouts. I loved the idea of someone growing Brussels sprouts—the one vegetable most everyone hates. The novel took off from there.

TH: … and, of course, *The Collective*?

DL: The book arose from a false start. The original novel I'd planned was going to be called *Every Now and Then*, and it was going to be in first person, narrated by a suicidal, drug-addicted, female Korean American poet amputee in a wheelchair who's stalking her Cambridge neighbor. I told this to the sales director at Norton, and I could see his face fall in abject horror with the mere idea that he might have been asked to try to sell a book like that. But obviously I ended up dumping that particular novel, an agonizing decision for me at the time, since I was pretty far into it. I just wasn't feeling it, though. I had been fighting it all the way. I knew I had a structurally sound idea for a book, but I finally decided it wasn't a novel I wanted to write.

So I started from scratch again. The only thing that survived from *Every Now and Then* was the poet's suicide attempt, which became the opening of *The Collective*, in which Joshua successfully kills himself in the same manner. (Four writers I knew, not close friends but acquaintances, killed themselves within a year and a half, and obviously that had an effect on me.) But what impelled me this time around was the thought of friendships, how they form and wane, the memory of all these great friends—all writers and artists—I'd had in my 20s and 30s in Cambridge. I missed those friends, I missed Cambridge, and I wanted to write a love letter to that period of my life, to all the starving artists I'd known.

TH: In *The Collective*, Militant Joshua who won't let you ignore race in the creation of art, and Esther believes ethnicity shouldn't be the determining factor of artistic expression—so whose "side" are you on?



DL: I side more with Esther, although you wouldn't think so reading the novel. But you know, I go back and forth on the issue of focusing on race as a subject, as you can see from my books. Sometimes I address it full on, sometimes hardly at all. In a way, *Wrack and Ruin* might have been a reaction to some of the questions I was asked when promoting *Country of Origin*. To wit: one interviewer asked me why I thought Koreans as an immigrant group seemed to do better economically in the U.S. than other groups. That was bizarre to me. I mean, *Country of Origin* wasn't even set in the U.S.; it takes place in Tokyo in 1980. How, then, did I become a socioeconomist specializing in U.S. immigration? I felt very uncomfortable being put in that position, being asked to speak as an expert on all things Asian American.

The Collective became a debate with myself about the issue, and the debate manifested itself through my characters, who ask: Do Asian American artists always have to have race as their primary subject? Do they always have to make their characters Asian American? Would it be race betrayal if they don't? Doesn't limiting yourself to the issue of race ghettoize yourself, or even perpetuate stereotypes?

My answers: No. No. No. Maybe. And I'll also say that this will likely be the last time I address race so explicitly in a book. I think I'm done with it.

What's different in *The Collective*, I think, is that the external incidents don't

matter as much as how the characters react to them. (That sounds facile. All fiction should do that.) But the book's less about racism and more about how Asian Americans wrestle with internal obligations about race.

TH: While you've said over and over again that *The Collective* is NOT autobiographical, the narrator Eric Cho and you have quite a few overlaps … not to mention this is the first book written in first person. So why the first person this time? And, of course, you'll have to 'fess up to what's 'real' …

DL: I had never written any fiction—not even a short story—in first person before. That was the challenge I posed for myself with *The Collective*. With each book, I try to do something very different, both technically and tonally, which is not, actually, a good career move for a writer. It's easier on everyone—booksellers, publishers, readers, agents, reviewers—if your books follow a somewhat familiar trajectory. It's confusing to people if you don't, I've learned.

There are quite a few autobiographical elements in the book, but not as many as you may think. I'll say this, though: this is my most personal book yet. A lot of what these characters feel, I have felt acutely at various points of my life. But most of the main actions or events in the book are made up.

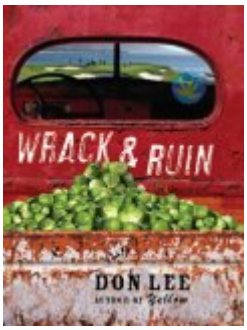
TH: How different was putting together book one, *Yellow*, with finishing up book four, *The Collective*?

DL: There's a big difference between being a debut writer and a midlist writer. With your debut, everything is new and exciting. With your fourth book, you've been through it all before, and although you (and your editor) still hope it'll be a breakout novel, you know that the chances of that happening at this stage of your career are slim. All you want is for it to find a few appreciative readers and for it to do well enough so you can sell your next book.

TH: I've been told by more than a few writers that naming a favorite book is like choosing a favorite child. But since you don't have any kiddies, I'm gonna risk asking you—do you have a favorite among your books?

DL: I haven't reread any of my books except for *Yellow*, which I was forced to do to answer some specific questions for a couple of interviews, and also to refamiliarize myself with the setting, since I was going to use it in *Wrack and Ruin*. I'd say that *Wrack and Ruin* is probably my favorite, because I had so much fun writing it. Technically, too, it's my most complicated book (albeit

deceptively so), with long chapters without space-breaks that run in concurrent time between the two brothers' points of view.



TH: Well, I was planning to let it go, but since you brought up *Wrack and Ruin* again, I have to ask—Brussels sprouts? Did you eat them by the bushel-full while doing your organic research? Love 'em or hate 'em?

DL: To be honest, I like them, but don't love them. Hard to cook well. For research, first I visited a little organic farm outside of Boston, trying to interview the farm manager, and he was being a bit pissy and close-mouthed until I found out he was a surfer and I began talking about Maverick's, the big-wave break near Half Moon Bay [California, the real-life inspiration for Lee's fictional Rosarita Bay featured in *Yellow*], and then he opened up to me. My main source became an old hippie named Don Murch, a really colorful guy who has a farm in Bolinas [California]. I talked to him on the phone for hours.

TH: Now that you've managed (and so well!) all those different genres, what can possibly be next?

DL: My next challenge to myself is to write a short novel (a friend of mine used to refer to her project at the time as *SBN*, *Short Bad Novel*, and I referred to my project then, my first novel, as *TFN*, *The Fucking Novel*). I think there's a real art to writing something that length, say less than 200 pages, and I don't know if I'm capable of it. All my novels thus far have been over 300 pages. The new one's going to be called *Lonesome Lies Before Us*. It'll be about an alt-country singer-songwriter going on a solo acoustic tour for his latest (self-released) album, and he'll be visiting four former bandmates in various cities. This is going to be my road trip/music book. The idea came about because I listened continuously to indie singer-songwriters like **Clem Snide** and **A. A. Bondy** and **Sun Kil Moon** while writing *The Collective*. It's been fun gearing up for it, because I've been relearning guitar by watching YouTube videos.

TH: Has your writing process changed over the last decade-plus?

DL: It changed dramatically between *Yellow* and writing my first novel. I had to ditch my old method of eking out each line, seeking perfection. I had to learn how to write first drafts quickly, not worrying initially about the quality

of the prose and just trying to lay out the story. Once a first draft is complete, revising is much easier and faster than you assume. That was the big lesson. But after *Country of Origin*, not much has changed, really. I'd say the only thing that's different is that now I'm a professor, I have to follow the academic schedule and really focus on getting my work done during summers. There's a lot of pressure to suddenly turn it on and produce once school is out. Otherwise, I still spend up to a year jotting notes and ideas in a Moleskine, then writing a sloppy first draft in a year, and then revising for another year. Or more. People don't realize how many more revisions you do even after you sell a book. I was revising *The Collective* until the last possible moment, which was with the third-pass proofs, four months before publication.

TH: Last time we talked, you were about to start your latest book tour for *The Collective*. You admitted, Eeyore style: "I am dreading everything. There's nothing I'm looking forward to. Even when things go well on tours … it's still awful for someone like me, a self-flagellating worrywart.… I have felt a doom and gloom about *The Collective* for months now." And then you won the 2013 Asian/Pacific American Award for Literature from the Asian Pacific American Librarians Association, so clearly your "DOOM-indicator" is a bit off. So was the tour really that bad?

DL: Okay, I'll confess that the anticipation was worse than the actual experience. It was a very short tour, as publishers prefer now: just five readings, and there was a good turnout at each. I did a fair number of the usual stuff, like radio interviews (for one of them, via phone, I had to sit in a tiny bathroom for 40 minutes, because I was staying in a loft on an incredibly noisy street, and it was the only room with a door I could close), but for this book release, I spent much more time answering Q&As for blogs and online magazines. That was the big change I saw from my previous tour.

TH: Now that you're oh-so-established—and having had all those years of experience on both sides of publishing—what are the top three things you would want every newbie writer (even if he or she is older than you are!) to know before going into this sanity-challenging publishing world?

DL: Don't do it. Ha! No, seriously, I'd say: 1) Once you sell your first book, your still-aspiring writer friends are going to act weirdly toward you. From there on out, you should only share your work-in-progress with fellow

published writers. 2) Don't get too wrapped up in looking at your sales ranking on Amazon and your rating on Goodreads, etc. Don't read every little review or comment. Don't Google yourself every five minutes. Tell your publisher to only alert you about the good shit. Don't over-promote yourself on Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, or your website. People will really begin to resent you if you do. 3) You're going to experience postpartum depression: first when you finish and sell your book (because this thing that you've been devoting yourself to for years is finally done, and now what the hell are you going to do with your life?), and again after the book is published. Yet (don't follow my terrible angst-ridden example!) make sure you take pride and pleasure in your accomplishment. It's been your lifelong dream to write and publish a book, and now you have. Very few people are so lucky.

Click here to read Terry Hong's feature piece on Don Lee.

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

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DON LEE

PHOTO BY MELISSA FROST

According to Anis Shivani, who conducted this interview, Don Lee would belong on any list of vastly underrated American writers. Lee's debut book, the story collection *Yellow* (Norton, 2001), with its Asian and biracial characters in the fictional California town of Rosarita Bay, won the Sue Kaufman Prize for First Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the Members Choice Award from the Asian American Writers' Workshop. His first novel, *Country of Origin* (Norton, 2004), about the disappearance in Japan of a biracial American woman, won the American Book Award, the Edgar Award for Best First Novel, and a Mixed Media Watch Image Award for Outstanding Fiction. *Wrack and Ruin* (Norton, 2008), his next novel, set again in Rosarita Bay, features two Asian-American brothers—Woody Song and his brother Lyndon, a once-famous sculptor who has abandoned artistic aspirations. Lyndon's character anticipates Lee's 2012 novel, *The Collective,* which takes its name from a Boston artists' collective—the 3AC, or the Asian American Artists Collective—formed by the three leading characters of the book, Joshua Yoon, Eric Cho, and Jessica Tsai. *The Collective* begins with news of Joshua's suicide reaching Eric (See Chapter One here, on page 85) and proceeds to explore the idea of commitment to artistic values in a multicultural context.

Don Lee is a third-generation Korean American. The son of a career State Department officer, he spent the majority of his childhood in Tokyo, where he attended the American School in Japan, and in Seoul. He received his B.A. in English literature from UCLA and his M.F.A. in creative writing and literature from Emerson College, Boston; from 1988 to 2007, he was the principal editor of the literary journal *Ploughshares.* He now directs the M.F.A. program in creative writing at Temple University, Philadelphia.

The Freedom to Mislead

AN INTERVIEW WITH DON LEE

Conducted by Anis Shivani

NEW LETTERS: When did you first think of writing *The Collective*? Tell us about the composition of the novel and what difficulties you encountered in giving it shape.

DON LEE: I wasn't in a good place when I started the book. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that I was at my lowest point as a writer. I'd just wasted a year working on another novel entitled *Every Now and Then.* It was to be narrated by a suicidal, drug-addicted Korean-American female poet amputee in a wheelchair who is stalking her Cambridge neighbor. It would have been a significant risk, a book with such an unsympathetic character, but I wasn't scared off by that prospect. In fact, I welcomed it (I think, as Americans, we're too insistent that characters be sympathetic). I had charted out the whole thing and written the first 30 pages. I gave them to my editor, my agent, and a couple of friends, and they all said go for it. But for some reason, I wasn't feeling it. I realized that I had been fighting it the entire way. I finally concluded that it just wasn't a novel I wanted to write.

Having to start from scratch again was dispiriting, devastating. I wondered at that point if I'd ever write another book. But in September 2009, I started working on *The Collective.* The only section I kept from *Every Now and Then* was the poet's suicide attempt, which became the opening for *The Collective,* in which Joshua Yoon kills himself in

the same manner. (Four writers I knew, not close friends but acquaintances, killed themselves within a space of a year and a half, and obviously that had an effect on me.) Initially, I thought of having the narrator, Eric Cho, become Joshua's literary executor and sift for clues as to why Joshua committed suicide, but I didn't want to write a quasi-mystery, and it didn't feel honest to me: You never know why people kill themselves. You do naturally reflect on your past with them, however, and that's how the frame structure of *The Collective* came about, with a present-time prologue and epilogue, and a long flashback in between. In truth, I've always disliked that structure, thinking it old-fashioned, but I was so desperate to get going on something, I went with it.

I completed the first draft in about a year, then spent another year and a half revising it (though I took a six-month break during that span). So, all in all, I suppose it went relatively quickly, although it certainly didn't feel like it did.

NL: How was this experience different from writing your previous two novels, *Country of Origin* and *Wrack and Ruin*—both of which I admired? Have your writing process and habits changed?

LEE: I was methodical about outlining *Country of Origin* in advance. Less so with *Wrack and Ruin,* which developed organically, seemingly rolling out without effort. I did do quite a bit of research for both books before beginning the drafting process in earnest. With *The Collective,* I didn't have an outline at first, and I hit a snag when I reached the end of the characters' time in college. Once I figured out the major action in the second half, though (the controversy over Jessica's sculpture, which I based on a friend's experience in Cambridge in 1994), I plunged on.

I used to write in longhand until halfway through *Wrack and Ruin,* then switched permanently to composing on my laptop. Otherwise, the process has stayed the same: about six months of writing notes and doing research, a year

for the first draft, then around a year of revisions. With the first draft, I aim for two pages a day. When I was at *Ploughshares,* I'd write three days a week. Now that I'm on an academic calendar, my writing time is less regimented. I'll write when I can during the school year (sometimes not at all), then work every day, all day, during the summer.

NL: Can you talk about some of the continuities of this book with your previous books, especially some of the characters and themes in *Yellow,* and in *Wrack and Ruin?*

LEE: In many ways, I think it's deadly for a writer to try to explicate his themes. It's better not to vocalize such an analysis—certainly not until the books come out, and you've put some distance on them. I will say that it's never been my intention to write books that are so tonally different from one another. I'd love to claim that I have tried to emulate Flaubert's vow never to write the same book twice, but I can't. I have surprisingly little control over the direction and tenor of my projects, regardless of my initial intentions and outlines. Usually, I'm mystified after writing the first chapter. This happened most notably with *Wrack and Ruin.* Oh, I'm writing a farce? I was left to ask myself. So I've done a story collection, a cross-genre literary mystery, a farce, and now a bildungsroman. (This is not, by the way, a recommended career path for writers. People are befuddled if you don't follow a somewhat predictable trajectory.) How are these books connected? I don't know if it's for me to say.

There are, I am willing to allow, linkages in characters. I'm thinking of the angry protagonist, poisoned by racial paranoia, in the novella *Yellow* and the callow young man in the story "Domo Arigato." They're certainly precursors to Joshua and Eric in *The Collective.* There are artists in "The Price of Eggs in China" (a chair maker) and in *Wrack and Ruin* (a sculptor), both of whom share a desire to distance themselves from the art world, and the brothers in that latter novel are antipodes, much like Joshua and Eric in *The Collective.*

(Characters who are oppositional in temperament provide built-in tension and drama if you can crowd them together, and when you throw in a third character to form a triangle, dialectical opportunities abound.) Maybe Faulkner was right: Maybe we're all writing the same story over and over.

NL: Would you talk about the publication history of *The Collective*? Did you accept any major editorial suggestions? Do you share your early drafts with other people?

LEE: I've been lucky. All my books have been published by W. W. Norton, with the same editor, Alane Salierno Mason. I got a two-book deal for *Yellow* and an unwritten novel, which became *Country of Origin.* She gave me an advance contract for *Wrack and Ruin* based on a two-paragraph synopsis. For what became *The Collective,* Norton only had a first-read option; they didn't give me an advance, which was understandable, given the state of the industry. But once I submitted an early draft, Alane convinced Norton to buy it pretty quickly, even though we all agreed that I needed to bolster the second half of the book, which I did the following summer. She's familiar with the way I work and was confident that I would improve the book.

We have a great working relationship. She knows when to leave me alone and when to push. Occasionally things become contentious, and she can be blunt in her criticisms, but I always know that she has the book's best interests at heart. We fight more about book covers and promotional materials than we do about editorial matters.

I used to have more outside readers but had just two for *The Collective:* the novelists Jennifer Egan and Fred Leebron. I've known both for over 20 years, since the start of our careers. I've swapped manuscripts with them for every single one of our books.

NL: Like many literary writers in this country, you started off writing stories, publishing a collection, *Yellow,* to launch

your career. In many ways, literary journals, where we must prove our talent (or if you're doing an M.F.A., the story-oriented workshop), are not exactly ideal training for becoming novelists. The transition can be difficult, would you agree?

LEE: For me, the transition wasn't that difficult, because a lot of my stories were plot-driven and, if you will, novelistic in scope to begin with. If one's short stories are more compressed or language-based or elliptical, the novel's larger canvas can be intimidating. Yet all sorts of story writers, with M.F.A.s or not, have managed the transition successfully. Yes, the shortcoming of most M.F.A. programs is that they don't give students much guidance in novel writing. Part of it has to do with the structure of workshops. Part of it is that the novel is unwieldy and perhaps something that's unteachable, that needs to be a process you struggle through individually. Part of it is that some students could use more time developing their sense of voice and vision and story before attempting a novel. It's relatively easy to write the first 50, 75, even 100 pages of a novel, but that's when many writers get stuck, realizing they don't have enough to propel the story forward. I do believe, however, that crafting short stories can be foundational for writing novels. It's a trope to liken novel writing to running a marathon, but I think it's apt. Without any previous racing experience, you certainly wouldn't start training for a marathon by going out and doing 26.2 miles from the get-go. You'd do intervals, you'd start with a 5K, then a 10K, you'd build endurance and make sure your stride and technique are in form first.

NL: A lot of your work deals with the struggle of the minority writer to stay true to his or her experience. To what extent should such fiction represent specifically Asian-American (or other minority) issues and preoccupations? Should fiction be colorblind? In *The Collective,* you've made this dilemma the centerpiece. Is the issue becoming more urgent for you?

LEE: *The Collective* is the first time I've portrayed writers, and I hope it'll be my last. But, as I indicated, after the false start I'd had with the other novel, I was desperate, and the issues seemed urgent to me at the time.

To be specific, the issues for Asian-American artists are: Do we always have to have Asian and/or Asian-American characters and subjects? Is it race betrayal if we don't? Does it limit our audience or even perpetuate stereotypes if we do? I can't say this is representative of what other Asian-American artists are asking themselves, but I started thinking about these matters a lot after the publication of my first novel, *Country of Origin.* While on tour for the book, I was peppered with questions about the Asian-American experience (and also about being Japanese; the book was set in Tokyo), and I felt extremely uncomfortable being put into that position, as a spokesperson on everything from immigration to assimilation to international relations to Japanese mores. Indirectly, I think *Wrack and Ruin* might have been a reaction to the discomfort I felt promoting *Country of Origin.* Although most of the central characters were Asian American, some were not, and ethnicity was not referenced until later on, as a peripheral issue.

But I kept asking myself those questions, and others: Has there been a form of literary affirmative action for ethnic writers, and, if so, has it ultimately hurt more than helped us? Has there been a backlash to multiculturalism? Have we been ghettoized as writers of color, and has that been the book industry's fault, or our own? Are white writers, when appropriating other races or cultures, treated differently? Is that kind of appropriation ethical? If we stopped writing about race and made our characters non-race-specific, would it lessen attention to our work? Has the subject of race been a crutch, lending an artificial urgency and weight to our books? Without it, would many of us be exposed as not very good writers?

I was having a debate with myself about those questions, and the debate manifested itself through the characters in

The Collective. But I wanted it to be an internal conflict among Asian Americans, not so much one in which they're victimized by external forces. Rather, I was interested in how these issues could affect a community of artists of color.

I think I'm done with addressing these issues now. It's time to move on.

NL: The narrator, Eric Cho, is generally sympathetic, being realistic about his (limited) talent as a writer, while the main driver of *The Collective,* Joshua Yoon (Meer), is pretty unsympathetic. I take it that you're talking about two sides of the writer's personality, both the realistic/pragmatic side (Eric) and the doggedly determined, even insanely driven, side (Joshua), both of which need to be in play, perhaps in an exquisite balance. Was Eric always as sympathetic as he turns out to be, and was Joshua always so disagreeable?

LEE: In the first draft, Joshua was even more strident, and the challenge was to give him more texture in subsequent drafts. But I don't actually find Eric entirely sympathetic. The events and characterizations are filtered through his narration, which he naturally sees in his favor. I think that's what's interesting about the first person: As a reader, though you can become seduced by the narrator's point of view, you must always be aware that this is a single and perhaps distorted perception of what's happening. In other words, I think all first-person narratives are inherently unreliable.

On the one hand, you could say that Eric is smart to give up when he does, that for him, given his lack of talent, he makes the right choice, vis-à-vis romanticism vs. pragmatism. On the other hand, as unforgiving and judgmental as Joshua is, perhaps his disappointment in Eric is warranted. Perhaps Eric takes the easy way out instead of working harder and sticking with it.

It's an agonizing decision—whether to keep going when success hasn't been forthcoming—that a lot of writers and artists must confront in their late 30s, I think. I had to make it

myself around then, weighing whether to lay everything on the line and go for it, or to put the dream aside forever, because I was sick of myself talking about it but never doing anything.

NL: I see one strong subtext of your novel as the conflict between community and solitude in the creation of art, and whether what results in either case is true art, or a facsimile of art. Do you agree that this is a key dilemma you're playing out?

LEE: As much as I tried earlier to evade discussing my thematic preoccupations, I think you've picked up on my true subject. In my mind, instead of race, what I really write about is loneliness. It's pretty much the standard epistemological questions that nearly every writer poses: Why am I here? Why do I feel so alone? For me, it began with my peripatetic upbringing, the son of a State Department officer. We shuttled back and forth between Japan and Korea and the States, living on Army bases and embassy compounds, and I never had a permanent home. When I was 13, my parents did buy one house in Falls Church, Virginia, but we lived there for only nine months before getting 30-days' notice that we were being transferred to Tokyo. All the furniture we'd bought for the house was packed up in crates and put in storage, never to be opened again until my father retired 20 years later.

That feeling of dislocation became more acute for me, not when I went to college at UCLA, but when I moved to Boston for graduate school. It was the first time I encountered racism on an everyday, personal level, and my sense of alienation became intermingled with questions about ethnicity and identity.

By nature, I'm shy and like my privacy, even anonymity. Yet, because of my jobs as an editor and teacher and writer, I've had to overcome my introversion and become skilled at the social graces and performance. I think I've gotten good at it, but that's not to say I've learned to enjoy it. In fact, each public appearance still drains me. (And this is on a relatively small scale. I'm a midlist writer. I don't go on

20-city tours. I don't appear on big stages or on major TV or radio programs.)

Consequently, I've had the impulse to hide away in solitude, and this conflicts with my concomitant desire to belong to a community and also to have my work read by a larger audience.

NL: As a fiction writer, one can get upset about the encroachments of political correctness (or a politically correct version of multiculturalism) in the arena of creativity. You do give considerable room to this dynamic, in the tussle between Joshua and Kathryn Newey at Mac (Macalaster College), or later between Joshua and Esther Xing at the 3AC (the Asian American Artists Collective), but the real emotional heart of the story seems to be at a bit of a remove from the fight over ideas. You're an even-handed arbitrator between the conflicting points of view, but not so distanced when it comes to other emotional tangles. Could you talk about this displacement?

LEE: It's certainly more interesting for a reader if you give equal weight to both sides of an argument. Otherwise, you're delivering a treatise or manifesto, not a novel. Truth be told, I'm not very invested in PC politics. Usually I dismiss such fights as demagoguery. What I was focusing on there were the shifts of power in group dynamics, especially in how they affect friendships, and how Eric wavers in his loyalty. Although he's not the most flamboyant character in the book, ultimately it's his story, as it must be with any first-person narrator, even when it appears he's more a passive observer than a forceful participant.

NL: How deeply did you draw on your own experiences as a teacher of creative writing at Emerson College in Boston (disguised as Walden in the novel) and editor of *Ploughshares* (appearing as *Palaver*) for this novel?

LEE: Not so much as a teacher at Emerson, but as a graduate student there. I was in the M.F.A. program at Emerson when it was in its infancy—very small and making a transition from its previous M.A. program. I was the first person to receive the M.F.A. degree. Back then, the school was housed in dilapidated brownstones on Beacon Street in the Back Bay. Likewise, *Ploughshares* was on its last legs, the office a shithole in Watertown, exactly as I describe in the book. But that's where autobiography departs. I used the staging but not the personalities. DeWitt Henry was my principal teacher at Emerson and the founding editor of *Ploughshares*, and he's nothing like Evan Paviromo, the editor of *Palaver.*

NL: I recently read and admired Richard Burgin's novel *Rivers Last Longer,* where Barry Auer is a similar character to Joshua, a writer with a rich inheritance who leads on his best friend, Elliot, also with literary aspirations, even to the point of inviting his friend to live in his house in New York. Burgin's character is far more sinister than Joshua, however, and even in literary terms, a charlatan, so that's a key difference. Still, the similarities are striking. There have been other recent novels taking on the darkness in the literary world. Lan Samantha Chang's 2011 novel, *All Is Forgotten, Nothing Is Lost,* for example.

LEE: I didn't know about Burgin's book, which sounds great. I've intended to read Sam Chang's novel but avoided it while writing *The Collective,* wanting to preclude similarities. (The same goes for reading college novels like Jeffrey Eugenides' *The Marriage Plot* and Chad Harbach's *The Art of Fielding.*) Ironically, I've always sort of despised stories or books about writers. I saw too many of them as an editor, and I see too many of them now as a teacher. It always has seemed to me like such a lazy, insular, unimaginative subject for a story. But here I am . . .

NL: You really should read *The Art of Fielding.* Anyway, your novel is a prolonged and disturbing meditation on pettiness thwarting creativity. It seems to me an essential aspect of a writer/artist's growth is to overcome the pettiness coming at one from all directions. Can you talk about this from your personal experience?

LEE: I think all writers and artists have an aversion to authority. Isn't that part and parcel of going into the arts, a rebellion against convention? First it's resisting familial pressures, then societal expectations, then institutional conformity. For me, it probably started as a kid living on the 8th-Army base in Seoul, witnessing (but not fully understanding) the subtle racism against the Korean nationals who worked on the base, and feeling it extend to me as a Korean American. As a teenager in Tokyo, I was fired from a summer job I loved, as a lifeguard at the embassy pool, because of a weaselly administrator. In my senior year, for a high school essay contest sponsored by the American Chamber of Commerce in Japan, I was given third place and not first when the judges learned I was Korean American; they actually questioned whether I had plagiarized the essay, and asked me to cite my research. As an adult, what's really raised my ire is institutional pettiness, first when I was editing *Ploughshares* and having to deal with the administration, which as a group was outrageously small-minded and mean-spirited (I'm talking about the higher-ups, not anyone in the writing department, I want to be clear), and then later as a professor caught in departmental politics, although in general it's been more comic than injurious to see.

NL: The novel is also, it seems to me, a paean to the heroic art of giving up—knowing when to give up. Eric eventually gives up on his dream of being an artist, although other members of the collective meet with quite a bit of success, and Joshua certainly has minor success as a novelist for a

while. Joshua's suicide, with which the novel begins, becomes the keynote which infects the narrative in retrospect. I also think of another character's attempted suicide (in imitation of the Buddhist monk, Thich Quang Duc, who famously set himself on fire in Vietnam) as an aspect of the same heroism. Can we really talk of this as heroism?

LEE: This is where dramatic irony and the unreliability of first-person narratives come into play: None of it is intended to be cast as heroic. On the contrary, I question whether those choices are, in fact, cowardly.

NL: Can you talk about the play of lightness and darkness in the novel? Did you make major adjustments along the way? Was it darker to begin with?

LEE: I'm not sure if you're asking about images and symbols, the motif of physical and metaphorical lightness and darkness and shadows in the book, or its tone and mood. In regard to the latter, yes, it was a problem for me, and I had to make adjustments. The book wobbled uncomfortably between tragedy and satire and comedy, and somehow I needed to smooth out those shifts so the book was a tragicomedy with satirical intonations. I don't know if I was entirely successful.

NL: Once again you have managed to have Asian-American characters without the story devolving to the level of talking only about the Asian-American experience (whatever that may be). Would you agree?

LEE: I'd like to agree. That was the intent. However, even though that was one of the central strategies of the book, and a principle that the characters espouse themselves as artists, I am certain that for some readers and critics, *The Collective* will be viewed primarily for its take on the Asian-American experience. A few will even think it's too in-your-

face. I can't complain about this too much, since race is discussed quite a bit, but I hope it doesn't overshadow the other themes in the novel.

NL: How do you compare the tone and voice of this novel to your other writing?

LEE: It's the first time I've ever written fiction in the first person. I'd never attempted it before in a story or novel (though I've written some nonfiction in the first-person); everything previous had always been in third person. That was the specific challenge I posed to myself with this book. There's always something technically different, new, that I want to take on with each project. I need something to get my juices going, even if it's a device that no one else will notice. For *Wrack and Ruin,* it was having pairs of 50-page chapters from two different points of view unfurling in parallel, unbroken real time. For *Country of Origin,* it was linking chapters from three different characters' POVs, one in linear flashbacks, with a tiny physical object or action, like an envelope being slipped under a door. There are other small things I do to amuse myself: private puns, plays on writer friends' work, using non-literary friends' names for ancillary characters. I can also be weirdly self-referential, having recurring characters or places, or even—I don't know why I do this—occasionally repeating a paragraph from a previous book or story, virtually verbatim, trying to work it into the story seamlessly. It's masturbatory of me to do these things, I realize, cleverness for cleverness's sake, but it keeps me going as I'm writing.

The Collective is definitely my most autobiographical book, yet—some of my romantic fiascos notwithstanding—most of the main actions or events in the book are made up. I didn't hang out with many Asian Americans in Boston, because back then, the people I met in literary circles were almost entirely white. I was never in an artists' collective, though later on I had friends in the Dark Room Collective.

I never got caught up in any of the racial controversies that are portrayed. Yet many of the locales are from my life, the restaurants and bars and offices, whereas in previous books the settings were wholly fictional, like the town of Rosarita Bay. That said, this is my most personal book. A lot of what these characters feel, I have felt acutely. Almost everything about Joshua and Eric, you could find in me.

NL: It seems to me that the novel is an astute attempt to depoliticize some of the things that have become politicized in a redundant or unnecessary manner: The judgment passed against Asian-American women and men choosing only whites to date and marry, for example. I've noticed, however, in a number of other recent novels by minority American writers, the idea that multiculturalism can only go so far, that one is perhaps better off with one's own kind. The examples of this trope are so many that I look for them by default. But you do something different. In *The Collective,* Joshua decries deviations from this trend (in an unbearably didactic manner) while Eric breaks the mold (by eventually marrying a white woman). You're bringing into the story several dynamics, self-imposed stereotypes by Asian creative/thinking types, in order to move beyond them. Can you comment please?

LEE: I know that some Asian Americans have always assumed I'm a Twinkie: yellow on the outside, white on the inside, someone who would rather align himself with the East Coast white establishment intelligentsia than "his people." But really, who are my people? Recently I met a Korean woman, who said, straightaway, "Do you speak Korean?" I told her no (although I used to as a kid and still understand some of the language), and she asked, "Why not?" as if it were something shameful. This sort of thing happens frequently, and it always seems strange to me. I don't think most Swedes, upon meeting a third-generation

Swedish American from Minnesota, ask so peremptorily, "Do you speak Swedish?"

I will admit, though, that in my youth, I subconsciously tried to separate myself from being identified with Asians—or, more accurately, the stereotypes attributed to them—and I will admit that I mostly dated white women. I think things really changed for me when I met the members of the Asian American Writers' Workshop in New York in the early 1990s. I enjoyed the camaraderie with them. There was a comfort level being with other Asian Americans. We had had similar experiences, and there was no need to explain or defend ourselves. From then on, I actively sought out the company of other Asian Americans. I can understand why, as reported in a recent *New York Times* article, Asian Americans are bucking a trend among non-white Americans and marrying other Asians more and more, rather than interracially.

Somewhere within this discourse, there's the question of whom I'm addressing in my books. What's the audience I imagine? Is it largely a white audience, or an Asian one? My answer has usually been that I don't think of a specific audience at all, that I write what I'm impelled to write and then hope that it will resonate with someone, anyone. Yet, with *The Collective,* I confess that I really hope that the novel will resound in particular with other Asian Americans. My people. Of course, what often happens in these sorts of cases is that the opposite occurs. A majority might be turned off by the book.

NL: Both political life and the novel seem to have lost their edge in part because of political correctness, which is a creed of sorts that sets limits to discourse, that preemptively eliminates dangerous discourse. Can you talk about this notion with respect to sexuality, which seems such an important part of all your work? Why should we trust novelists (as though they were designated truth-tellers)? Shouldn't novelists be allowed to mislead readers?

LEE: The first and practically only comment my father made after reading my first book, *Yellow,* was "There's a lot of sex in here." For me, it's a way of being somewhat subversive, transgressive, mainly because, as a stereotype, Asians are not considered sexual beings, with the exception of the whole Suzie Wong, dragon-lady image.

I concur that an odd kind of tameness seems to have afflicted American novels. We don't see too many Michel Houellebecqs in the States. I don't think it has to do with political correctness or any kind of impulse to submit to collective docility and sonority. It could be argued that it has something to do with today's marketplace, but I think it has more to do with our own longstanding instincts as readers. In Frank O'Connor's seminal study about the short story, *The Lonely Voice,* first published in 1963, he posited that the story form lends itself to "submerged population groups," people on the margins, outcasts, misfits, but not so much with novels, in which characters must be more sympathetic to sustain readers' interest and patience—a function of human nature.

But no, it's not the responsibility of novelists to be truth-tellers. *Narrators* (not novelists) should be granted the freedom to mislead readers—that's a subtle but important distinction, I feel, and it's applicable even with third-person narratives, which are never quite as objective as lay people assume.

NL: Is *The Collective* simultaneously your saddest and funniest book to date?

LEE: I think it might be my saddest book (which, I'll say, was an explicit objective), but I view *Wrack and Ruin* as my funniest. I wish more people had read that novel. Most of my writer friends believe it's my best work.

NL: I was haunted by Foucault's comment in his famous essay "What Is An Author?" while reading your book. "Our

culture has metamorphosed this idea of narrative, or writing," he says, "as something designed to ward off death [as with *The Thousand and One Nights* or the Greek epics]. Writing has become linked to sacrifice, even to the sacrifice of life: It is now a voluntary effacement which does not need to be represented in books, since it is brought about in the writer's very existence. The work, which once had the duty of providing immortality, now possesses the right to kill, to be its author's murderer, as in the cases of Flaubert, Proust, and Kafka." I think this passage is relevant to your book. Do you have any thoughts?

LEE: That essay baffles me. At first, Foucault seems to advocate the erasure of the author as an irrelevant entity (as Barthes does in "The Death of the Author") but then goes into all the transdiscursive effects that authors have. I'm not a scholar. I don't have a background in structuralism or post-structuralism; and in many ways, I think literary theory and contemporary writing are at complete odds with each other, and that's why there's so much conflict when creative-writing programs are housed within English departments: Fundamentally, philosophically, it appears to me, each discipline does not really believe in the validity of what the other is doing.

I'll address the question in more tangential and prosaic terms. We're all looking for immortality. That's impossible, of course, so for authors, our books are our best chances to live forever. Yet, in spite of whatever prominence we're able to achieve during our lifetimes, there is no guarantee that our books will be read and discussed in the future. The chances are, actually, quite slim, especially these days, with the book industry withering. (I am certain, for instance, that I will see some of my books go out of print.) Have some authors, then, tried to develop a certain hagiography to better their chances? Have some even thought, perversely, that committing suicide might enhance their reputations, joining Hemingway, Woolf, Plath, and so many others? Perhaps.

But really, I believe those writers chose to erase or efface or sacrifice themselves not in service of their mythographies, but because they were suffering from simple unadulterated, inconsolable despair—the last thing they cared about at that point was literary legacy. As authors, we all get disappointed at times by our seeming irrelevance, particularly in today's culture, and we all get depressed occasionally by the ways we've come up short in our literary ambitions, but we all know, in the end, that it's not the utmost sum of our lives, as much as it obsesses us.

NL: What are you writing now? What is the formal challenge you most want to address or overcome next as a novelist? Is there a subject or theme most waiting to get out of you?

LEE: I find it difficult to start a new book until the previous one is published. I was still doing touchup revisions on *The Collective* until late February, when Norton slammed the door on any more changes, and after that, I got wrapped up in school stuff and a two-week windsurfing trip, and now I'm preoccupied with promoting the novel. Psychically, I'm in stasis, anxious about reviews (although I decided not to read most reviews this time around, and have imposed a radio silence on myself, resisting self-Googling), anxious about how it will sell, if I will still have a career as a novelist, if anyone will show up to my readings, if anyone will like this fucker. Apart from that, I'm in fine shape. I really can't wait for all of this to be over so I can move on with my life.

I have the glimmering of an idea for the next book. It'll be about an alt-folk/country singer-songwriter, and my challenge to myself will be to make it a very short novel, less than 200 pages. Europeans, especially French or Belgian writers like Jean-Philippe Toussaint, have this form down pat. In general, Americans do not, maybe because we're always trying to write the Great American Novel. We need to get over that.