

FICTION

Don Lee's Long War on Asian American Stereotypes



Don Lee, author of "The Partition." Jane Delury

[BUY BOOK ▾](#)

When you purchase an independently reviewed book through our site, we earn an affiliate commission.

By Jane Hu
May 10, 2022

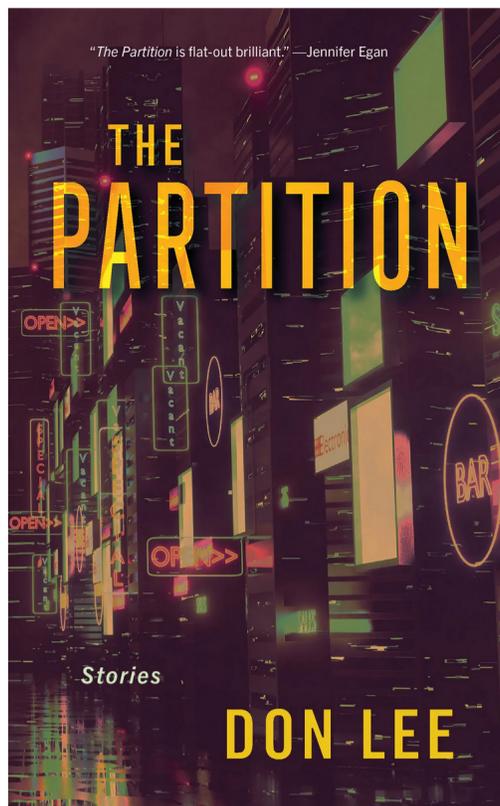
THE PARTITION

Stories

By Don Lee

Few fiction writers have worked as tirelessly to subvert stereotypes about "Orientals" as the Korean American Don Lee. The protagonists in his debut, the 2001 story collection "Yellow," range in ethnicity (from Korean to Japanese to Chinese) and occupation (from professional elites to mad poets), suggesting the heterogeneity of contemporary Asian American life. Lee's novels, whether about Asian spies in 1980s Japan ("[Country of Origin](#)") or bohemian Asian artists in Cambridge, Mass. ("The Collective"), also span a broad spectrum. But the organizing conceit of all his fiction has remained consistent: Asian Americans are not monoliths.

"The Partition," Lee's first collection of stories since "[Yellow](#)," represents a return to form, replaying many of the same thematic and stylistic concerns from his debut. The opening story, "Late in the Day," follows the failed career of a once-promising indie filmmaker who now makes vanity projects for rich Californian Asians. "Confidants" lingers on the everyday romantic exploits of two Asian Americans: one a high school dropout who quickly lets us know he is "not a model minority," and the other an alluring English professor at Johns Hopkins. In "UFOs" (an acronym for "Ugly Orientals," with an unprintable adjective in between), a Korean American news reporter who has plastic surgery and Anglicizes her name to Victoria Crawford simultaneously dates two men: a white guy with an Asian fetish, named Richard, and an Asian doctor and purported UFO named Yung-duk Moon. The story ends with a twist, perhaps a predictable one in Lee's hands; Victoria dumps Yung-duk in a moment of sudden cruelty, only to realize later that the true UFO might be herself.



Here we meet the same figures and tropes from “Yellow”: striving artists who sell out; slackers; lovers with internalized self-hatred that turns them violently bitter and paranoid. Many different faces fall under the loose and muddled category “yellow,” though “The Partition” is largely populated by those of *East Asian* descent (that is, those who have historically been put into this category); South and Southeast Asians rarely appear in his books. Still, Lee narrates from a collective perspective, his stories offering a kaleidoscopic vision of all the ways it feels to be yellow.

Most of the stories in “The Partition” feature aging characters who look back nostalgically on an earlier period in their life. “Years Later,” the shortest story in the collection, depicts a young woman’s erotic encounter, climaxing in a proleptic vision of her hitherto unknown future: “She wanted it to last forever, this feeling — youth, time, glory, everything still before her, waiting, her extraordinary life — but she felt it rolling over her and gave in to it.” Sentences like these, intended to move the reader, often tip into overwritten melodrama. Lee’s stories are often about disappointment, but his prose, too, can disappoint in deflating moments such as these.

The book concludes with an ambitious three-story cycle titled “Les Hôtels d’Alain,” which tracks the itinerant *bildung* of one Alain Kweon from his youth as an aspiring thespian to his lonely middle-aged years as a washed-up actor, who now runs a successful chain of artisanal boba shops. “I had had this amorphous idea that my boba tea business would be a way to affirm and celebrate my — and other Asian Americans’ — racial heritage,” Alain reflects late in the final story. “Yet boba tea wasn’t Korean or Okinawan or anything else of mine ethnically. It’d simply been another appropriation, another commodification in the guise of cultural identity. What did it amount to? ... Had it all been a lie?”

These questions resonate fearfully throughout “The Partition.” In some ways, Alain is a kind of Everyman — the aimless, alienated American male overpopulating the classic short stories of John Cheever, J. D. Salinger and Richard Yates. When he’s viewed through the lens of Lee’s significant career and contributions, however, it’s hard not to read Alain also as a metaphor for the collective struggles of contemporary Asian American self-representation. And how much there is still left to do.

Don Lee returns to stories about race in 'The Partition'

By [Kate Tuttle](#) Globe Correspondent, Updated April 21, 2022, 2 hours ago

The short stories in Don Lee's second collection, "[The Partition](#)," range widely in time span, but the newest one was written just this past fall, and set during a time of COVID and violence against Asian Americans. "A lot of it had to do with the former administration in the White House and what was happening and the tenor in the country in terms of race relations," said Lee. "I thought, 'How can I not address this?' That kind of urgency really came into play after the Atlanta murders, plus all of the anti-Asian hate, in New York City in particular."



David Wilson for the Boston Globe

For Lee, whose grandparents came to the US from Korea between World War II and the Korean War, identity hasn't always been front and center in his fiction. "I've alternated. One book I write about race and the next book I don't at all. I get sort of sick of it, and then something happens where I feel compelled to do it again," he said. "I'm constantly ambivalent about it. I ask these questions about whether as writers of color we always have to write about race. One thing I've always tried to do is have characters of color but not go into the stereotypical stories."

Get The Big To-Do

Your guide to staying entertained, from live shows and outdoor fun to the newest in museums, movies, TV, books, dining, and more.

Lee, who teaches at Temple University and has published a previous story collection, "Yellow," as well as four novels, said he didn't grow up wanting to write. His initial plan entering college was to major in mechanical engineering and then get a PhD in oceanography, he said, "because I wanted to build and pilot underwater submersibles. I watched a lot of Jacques Cousteau as a kid!" It wasn't until he'd cycled through a number of

other majors (11 in total) that he landed where he was meant to be: "I kept on edging toward the humanities, until finally I let go of the sciences and got an English degree."

Don Lee will read at 7 p.m. Wednesday at [Harvard Book Store](#).

Kate Tuttle, a freelance writer and critic, can be reached at kate.tuttle@gmail.com.

Booklist

Advanced Review – Uncorrected Proof

Issue: March 1, 2022

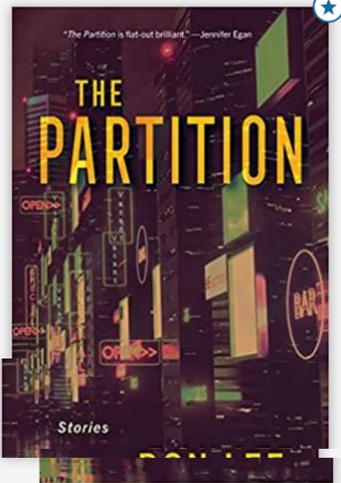
★ **The Partition.**

By Don Lee

Apr. 2022. 296p. Akashic, \$27.95 (9781636140315)

Familiar joy is immediate as one reenters Lee's signature worlds of brilliant resonance and quiet depth. In his first short story collection since his lauded *Yellow* debut, Lee again questions identity, unlikely relationships, and fleeting connections. "Truth was a collection of falsehoods," Lee's filmmaker protagonist ponders in the opening "Late in the Day" as he reconnects with a one-night fling, "with which you chose to define yourself, and for which you were grateful." Deceit haunts "Commis," as a junior chef helps close down her family's Chinese restaurant in Missouri during her pandemic unemployment and confronts the married older man with whom she had an affair as a teen. Cheaters also populate "Confidants," in which suspicions (and a gunshot) terminate an already-tenuous relationship; in "UFOs," a television journalist chasing lurid stories avoids commitments with married lovers. Lee further showcases his ingenious narrative acrobatics in "Years Later," in which a final assignation between two twentysomethings also reveals their separate futures, and in "The Partition" (the collection's highlight), which manages to gleefully skewer both academia and the international publishing world. "*Les hôtels d'Alain*" is a triptych novella, which follows an untethered Korean Hawaiian teen through contented-enough middle age. While Lee's devotees will joyfully relish casually dropped references to previous titles, new readers should savor plenty of first-time delight.

— Terry Hong



+ BOOKSHELF

Smart, sexy, darkly funny, and enlightening stories from a master of the form.

READ REVIEW



THE PARTITION

BY DON LEE · RELEASE DATE: MAY 10, 2022

Nine stories feature complicated Asian American characters living insightfully depicted lives in the worlds of moviemaking, restaurants, and bedrooms.

The complicated, frustrating, sometimes self-defeating experience of Asianness defined by Cathy Park Hong in *Minor Feelings* receives kaleidoscopic treatment in Lee's sixth work of fiction, returning to the concerns of his landmark debut collection, *Yellow* (2001). Like the frustrated film director in the first story here, "Late in the Day," Lee has, in his interim novels, given us narratives that include Asian characters but are not mostly about ethnicity. Now he dives back in, deconstructing the exponential "Was she Chinese? Japanese? (She was Korean.) Subsequent was her nationality. Was she a North Korean or South Korean citizen, then? Or an immigrant? Did she have a green card? (She was a naturalized US citizen.) Then there was the question of her name, Ingrid Kissler. Was this an Americanization of her Korean name, something she had made up? Or had she once been married? (She'd been adopted by a white couple from Chanhassen, Minnesota, at the age of two, from an orphanage in Seoul.) This character is in trouble—her tenure application is being blocked because her translation of a Korean novel has been revealed to be full of errors. Actually, she's not fluent in Korean. Her meeting with Yoo Sun-mi, the author of the novel, takes place in the wilds of Colima, Texas, a location evoked brilliantly here and in parts of the final sequences of three stories. This trilogy, called "*Les hôtels d'Alain*," follows the life of minor film star Alan Kwan in three incandescent episodes showcasing, from the title on out, the author's signature dramatic irony. The first is set in Alan's youth as a CIA agent's son living in a hotel in Tokyo; it revolves around a disastrous date at an Eric Clapton concert. The second features Alan's experience during the boiling-hot, seemingly endless shoot of a narco film in El Paso. Playing a hit man forced to speak his single line in the stereotypical "Oriental" accent, he essentially destroys his career. And finally, on to his trials in middle age as a bubble tea mogul in San Francisco.

Smart, sexy, darkly funny, and enlightening stories from a master of the form.

"Oriental" accent, he essentially destroys his career. And finally, on to his trials in middle age as a bubble tea mogul in San Francisco.

Smart, sexy, darkly funny, and enlightening stories from a master of the form.

+ 1

+ 1

f

f

🐦

🐦

✉

✉

🖨

🖨

f

f

🐦

🐦

✉

✉

🖨

🖨

f

f

🐦

🐦

✉

✉

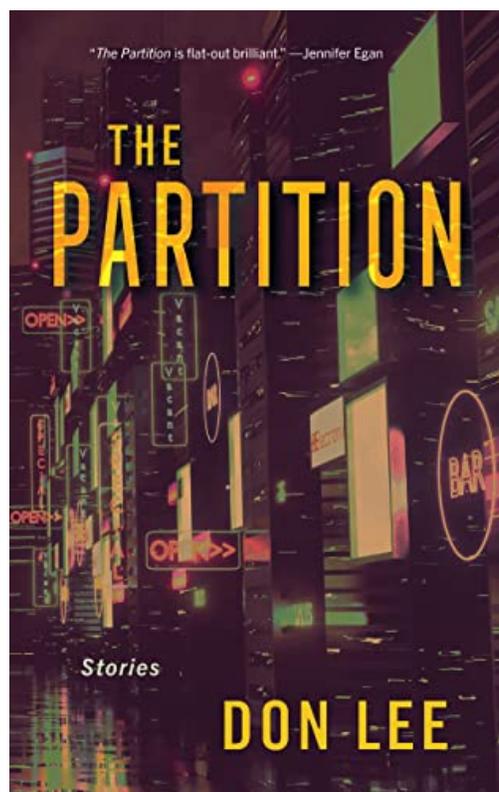
🖨

🖨

Pub Date: May 10, 2022 Page Count: 296 Review Posted Online: Oct. 26, 2022
ISBN: 978-1-63614-031-5 Publisher: Akashic

Categories: LITERARY FICTION | SHORT STORIES | GENERAL FICTION

Publishers Weekly — Feb. 7, 2022



The Partition

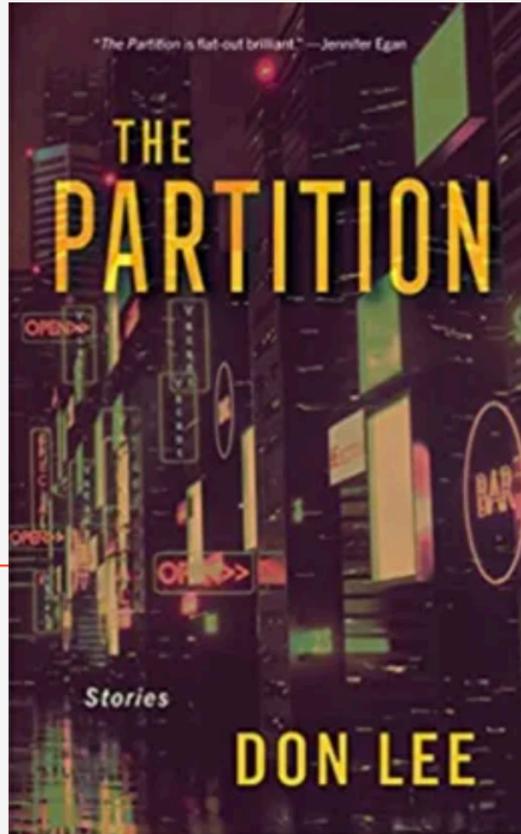
Don Lee. Akashic, \$27.95 (296p) ISBN

978-1-63614-031-5

Korean American writer Lee (*Lonesome Lies Before Us*) delivers a stylish set of erotic stories. His characters are Asian Americans who wrestle with estrangement from their homelands, alienation in the United States, and a longing for intimacy in a world of fleeting romance. In “Late in the Day,” an indie film director has a one-night stand with a girl in Chicago, only to meet her again much later in Hawaii when she is no longer glowing with youth. The title story features an androgynous academic who translates a transgressive Korean novel and then flies to Texas to meet the book’s surprisingly glamorous author. The collection ends with “Les hotels d’Alain,” a triptych of stories that detail the life of Alain Kweon, an actor who eventually becomes the owner of a successful chain of artisanal boba tea shops in San Francisco. Lee has a habit of overdoing the details, such as a superfluous explanation of the Mission District’s gentrification, but when he allows his stories to run, they offer gorgeous, psychological portraits of men and women caught in the throes of middle age. This smart collection about love and belonging will leave readers wanting more. (*Apr.*)

Best read for AAPI Month

"The Partition," by Don Lee



"The Partition"

\$27.66

 AMAZON

\$27.95

 BARNES AND NOBLE

\$25.71
~~\$27.95~~

 BOOKSHOP

"Don Lee is one of those masterful storytellers who is both classic and modern, who can transport you into any setting, with any character," Wang said. "As cheesy as this sounds, he puts the author in authority. ... I chose Partition for the precision and control with which Lee writes about Asian American identity, about race and quite simply, about people and their relationships with themselves, in the great big world."

Open in app ↗

Sign up

Sign In



Search Medium



Zachary Houle

Follow

Apr 13 · 5 min read · Listen



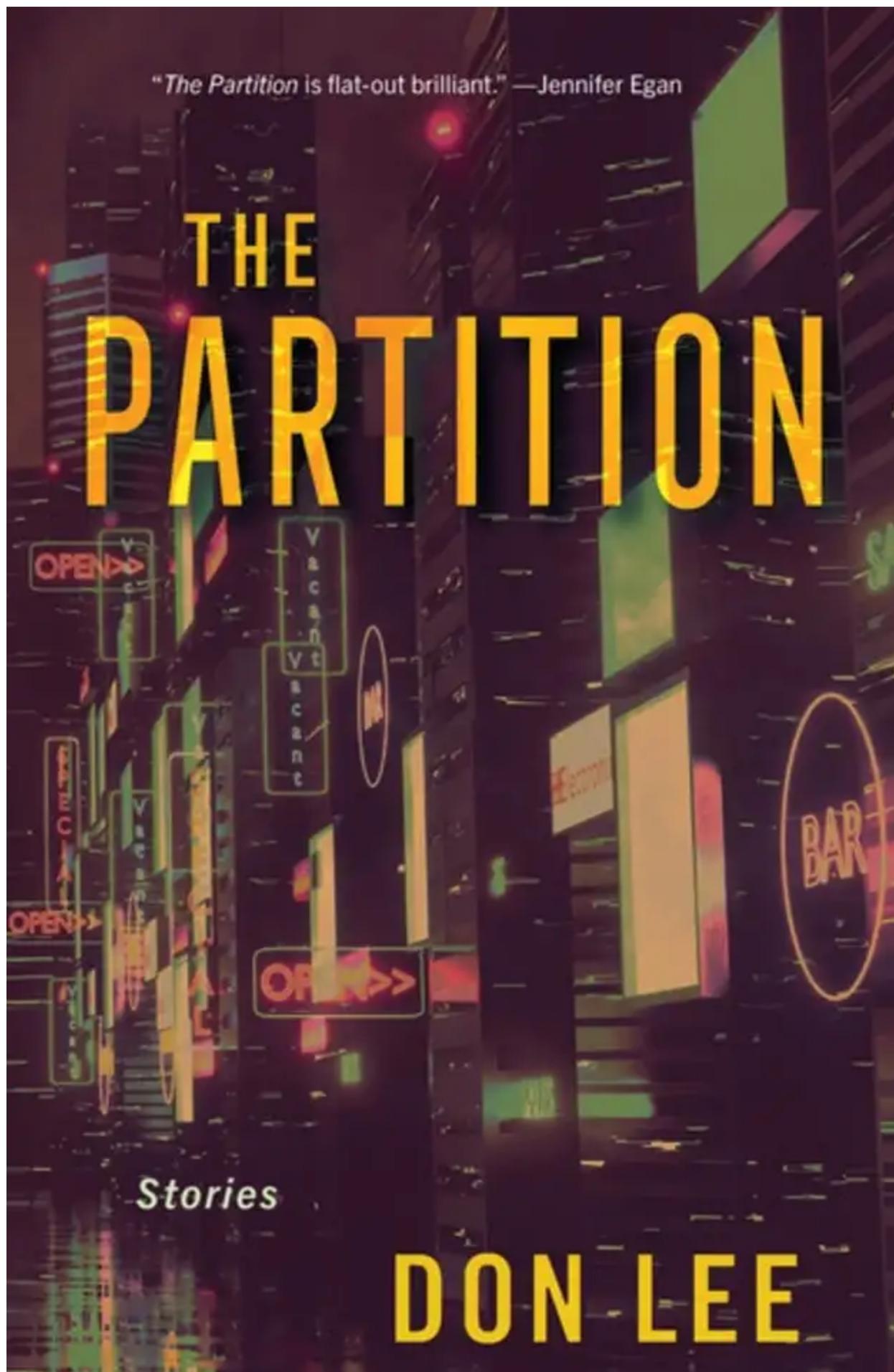
Save



Don Lee

A Review of Don Lee's "The Partition"

Alone and Apart





"The Partition" Book Cover

Author Don Lee and I go way back. I reviewed his 2012 novel, *The Collective*, for a popular webzine, and wrote a glowing piece about that book, which focused on a group of Asian American art college kids who were grappling with their art and their relationships (and particularly their relationships with white people, if memory serves correct) at the same time. Turns out that the publicist must have really liked that review because a piece of it was blurbed on the opening inside pages of the paperback edition that came out about a year later — which is probably as close as I'm going to get to being published in book form by a major publisher. *The Collective* was a good read, but his latest book, a collection of nine short stories called *The Partition*, is even better yet. It is simply a Grade A, top drawer collection of stories featuring Asian American characters who are grappling with their identities. It's simply a must-read, even if it treads somewhat similar ground to [Gish Jen's *Thank You, Mr. Nixon*](#), another story collection that came out earlier this year. Each of these stories is self-contained but features characters that are so enduring, but feature characters that are so enduring, you wish that almost each of these pieces be expanded to novel-length tales just so we can find out what happens to them — even if Lee does include a bit of a précis as to what happens to them sometimes.

There is an old saw that every short story collection contains some clunkers — and that some stories are better than others. That's not really the case with *The Partition*: virtually all these stories are worthy of merit in some way, and they are all immaculately detailed and exceedingly well written. My favourite of the batch might just be the titular piece, where an androgynous woman living in California and is on track to being tenured at the college she teaches at, finds her life unravelling over a novel she translated that wasn't entirely faithful to the source. It's a story that's partially about the rift between Asians and Asian Americans, but it's also a piece about artistic integrity and how art is shaped by languages. It's a stunningly good read, one that ends with an unexpected conclusion. But picking a favoured story shouldn't diminish the other stories as there are some interesting experiments here. For instance, the final three stories all feature the same character at different ages

of his life and form a sort of novella. There's a link between the final story and the first story in the collection, the latter being a tale about an Asian American film director struggling to be heard and seen.

That's the thing about *The Partition*: it has a uniform voice, and you can tell that you're in the talented and capable hands of a master who clearly knows what he is doing. I found it interesting that every single one of these stories, in some way, features food, which would make for an interesting comparison with another book being released on the same day that looks at family dynamics in the restaurant biz: Jennifer Close's *Marrying the Ketchups*. And all of the stories here focus on romantic and sexual relationships, all of them failures. That makes *The Partition* a puzzle of a short story collection: everything is well pieced together and fits together well. This isn't merely some hodgepodge collection of stories that aren't thematically linked: every piece has its place. While it's true that some might find this to be rather one-note, and that the collection might be a tad repetitive, the thing is that there's enough variety introduced into these characters' circumstances that makes for an interesting and illuminating read.

Don Lee might not be a household name, but he's somewhat well known among those following American letters. He's friends with the Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Jennifer Egan, who thanks him for being a reader of early drafts of her recent book *The Candy House* and blurbs *The Partition* on its front cover. (Lee returns the favour by thanking her in the acknowledgments section of this collection.) He's also the type of writer, to the best of my knowledge, who is consistently good. With *The Partition*, however, he kicks his writing up a notch and takes it to a whole other level. This is an exceptionally well-crafted book about what it means to be a person of colour in the United States and what it means to be something of a half-breed (if I can use that term colloquially), as many of the characters are of mixed race. That makes it difficult for them to truly fit in and find their place in society — Americans shun them for being too ethnic, while Asians shun them for not being ethnic enough — and this is a provocative, eye-opening read on how some people will never truly full fit into American or Asian society, thus never attaining the American Dream. That makes this an important book — however, it's also one that is wonderfully written, which is probably the real reason you should seek this out.

In the end, *The Partition* is essentially a book that shows what it means to be alone and apart — distinct from the pack — and covers a lot of ground. (It should be mentioned that it is set from the mid-'70s to the present day, COVID and all, for instance — making it enduring and relevant for readers in the here and now.) I cannot be more effusive in my praise for *The Partition*: this is a special book that is pure magic on several levels. Along with the aforementioned *Thank You, Mr. Nixon*, this just might be one of the best story collections to come along in some time and should be sought out by readers interested in Asian culture. It's a true keeper and should be savoured by all.

Don Lee's *The Partition* will be published by Akashic Books on April 26, 2022.

Of course, if you like what you see, please recommend this piece (click on the clapping hands icon below) and share it with your followers.



Get in touch: zacharyhoule@rogers.com

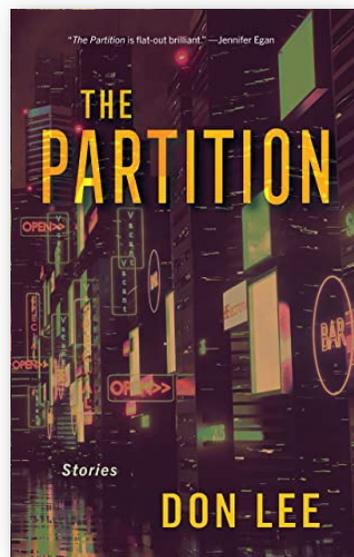
Get an email whenever Zachary Houle publishes.

Your email

 **Subscribe**

By signing up, you will create a Medium account if you don't already have one. Review our [Privacy Policy](#) for more information about our privacy practices.

The Partition


[Buy on Amazon](#)

The Partition is a wide-ranging collection of nine short stories focusing on aging, loneliness, sexual identity, the brutal competition in the movie industry (“Late in the Day” and “Les hotels d’Alain”), the politicking and cutthroat nature of diplomatic assignments; and casual dating and the devastating aftermath of a breakup.

Additional themes include the rarefied and ravaging standards for female beauty that compel some to plastic surgery (“Confidants”, “The Partition”). But perhaps the stand-out perspective found throughout *The Partition* is the fact that all main characters are Asian American (primarily East Asian American) and not white. The reader will often have to be reminded that the assumption all characters are assumed to be white is not the case.

The short stories deal with abandonment and jealousy in family relationships, partnerships motivated by money and ambition, teenage sexual insecurities, and career choices that are often immoral and callous. In other words, dissecting the challenges all adults face at different stages in their lives. What makes these stories metaphorically a “partition” is the fact that the interjection of ethnic identity is always there, imposed by whites and almost never set aside. The partition is divisive.

All stories deal with subtle, submerged, and scathing stereotypes imputed upon the characters because of white bigotry: the sexualization and fetishization of women for their “exotic” beauty, the psychological castration and emasculation of men, the academic but “nerdy” student. These pestilent vectors make all the characters deeply wounded at times in a specifically white American context, with overtones of racism. The stereotypes whisper of limitations and impossible obstacles that are internalized and destructive.

Two stories are worthy of being novellas in themselves. “The Partition,” is the titular portrayal of an American academic, Ingrid Kissler, who is Korean American: “She was thoroughly happy, being alone. . . . They couldn’t abide that anyone would actually choose to be alone.”

And Ingrid is convinced unequivocally that her life will be stable and absolutely independent of any personal relationships. Her position as an untenured professor and translator of Korean literature is more than enough for a satisfying life . . . until it is not. The free-wheeling juxtaposition of the Korean writer, Yoo Sun-mi, and the hyper-restrained and introverted Kissler could not be a more astonishing

contrast between the resulting behavior of being raised in the US as a person of color versus being raised in Korea with the same ethnicity. The journey of the two women alternates between hilarious and redemptive.

The second standout is "Les Hotels d'Alain" which guides the reader on a sweeping overview of Alain Kweon, first with his CIA expat family as a teenager residing with his parents in Japan. Finding joy and pain with his first white girlfriend is authentically rendered in dealing with not only sexual but also racial politics. Then there are assignments in other "hotels" in the Middle East with his unhappily married parents.

Back in the US, as a young adult, Alain is committed to becoming an actor but relegated to stereotyped roles as a Chinese bit-player in low-budget kung-fu action movies. In middle age, Alain finally becomes financially successful as an entrepreneur who has created a faux Taiwanese drink—boba tea—culturally appropriated for San Franciscan white affluence. By the time Alain is on the cusp of 60 years of age, he has to assess the retrospective of his life: where he thought he would be and where he is now, "When I was fourteen, fifteen," I said, "I could've never predicted this is where I'd find myself. I never would've thought my life would end up like this. Did you?"

Couldn't we all ask ourselves the questions Don Lee raises? *The Partition* is a collection of tales of the universal dilemmas in being human. We are prisoners of our own subjective experience and that leads to having blind spots we didn't even know we had. *The Partition* may help us get out of our defensive crouch and enjoy the ride.

Diana Y. Paul is the author of the award-winning *Things Unsaid*. Her short stories have appeared in a number of literary journals.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

[Print PDF Now](#)

[Print Now](#)

[Download](#)

[Home](#)

[Recent
Review](#)

[Fiction](#)

[NonFic](#)

[About t](#)