



INTERVIEWS

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Bookforum talks to Ha Jin

Courtney Fiske

Eva Hesse
Diaries

These fascinating journals from 1955 to 1970 document Hesse's experiences of the world and her evolution as an artist.

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Ha Jin's writing shares something of his biography. Born in 1956 in northeast China, Jin volunteered in the People's Liberation Army before venturing stateside in 1985 to study American literature at Brandeis University. Spanning four short story collections and six novels, his oeuvre confronts events in China's recent past—the Korean War, the Cultural Revolution, and Tiananmen Square—head-on, with a bluntness that verges on deadpan. His prose has a similar effect to that of poetry: spare and unadorned, it traces, evokes, but refuses to spell out. This style befits the worlds that Jin renders: his historical vignettes are almost always drawn in shades of gray.

Jin's latest book, *Nanjing Requiem*, tackles the Rape of Nanjing, the slew of atrocities that followed Japan's capture of China's then-capital in December 1937, five months into the second Sino-Japanese war. Told through the eyes of Anling Gao, a fictional administrator at Jinling Women's College, the novel's true protagonist is the historical figure Minnie Vautrin, an American missionary haunted by the brutality of Japan's occupation. The week of *Nanjing Requiem's* release, Jin spoke to *Bookforum* about his writing.

Bookforum: You began as a poet. What was behind your decision to begin writing fiction?

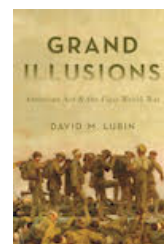
HJ: There was no clear decision: it was almost a natural step. My first book of poems is about my army experience in China. Then I realized that some of the material would be more effective as prose, so I began to work on some short stories, and then, step by step, I began to write more fiction.

Bookforum: Is there a particular form—poetry, short stories, or novels—that you feel most comfortable writing in?

HJ: Novels are more physical, because they demand a lot of time and concentration. So, in that sense, while I'm capable, I must try to write a few novels. But, because of the way I make a living, I think short stories are a more suitable form. When you teach, you can always pick up a story, work on it, and then go out and do your daily work. The short story is close to poetry. It is not easier or easy exactly, but I feel like my mind can hold it. It takes time to immerse yourself in a novel and then, at a certain stage, the mind can hold the whole thing in yourself, but that takes a lot of time and concentration.

Bookforum: When writing, how often do you draw from personal experience?

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HJ: As an author, I must be touched or moved by something: otherwise, how I could spend years working on a novel? In that sense, it has to be personal, and it has to be autobiographical because you have to have an emotional, even existential, relationship with the subject matter. I don't think I would put myself into any stories. But, at core, there is always an autobiographical element or motivation.

Bookforum: The majority of your writing is banned in China. Have you ever been given an official explanation from the Chinese government?

HJ: No, they wouldn't bother to speak with the author. Usually, a book is sent by the publisher to the censorship department. If it is rejected, the authorities only respond to the publisher. They don't speak to the author at all.

Bookforum: How do you understand the role of politics in relation to your work?

HJ: I'm not a political writer. On the other hand, especially in China, politics is the fabric of a person's life. There is no way you can live outside politics. For instance, I do believe, in present China, the biggest subject matter is the conflict between the individual and the state. If I want to be a good and conscientious writer, I cannot avoid dealing with that theme. But, by writing any story related to that subject matter, of course I become political. In that sense, I cannot avoid being political.

Bookforum: Have you ever written in Chinese?

HJ: I wrote some poems in Chinese, but not prose. I have also translated two of my short story collections into Chinese: *Ocean of Words* and *A Good Fall*. One of the two translations was a joint effort with my wife.

Bookforum: You have criticized Liu Yutang's 1939 book, *Moment in Beijing*, for trying too hard to "explain China" to a Western audience. How do you position your own writing about China against this impulse?

HJ: Generally, people say that when you write about China or another place, your aim should be to try to explain what life was like there. But I don't think that is the position of a creative writer. If you want to write a piece of literature, you have to tell a story with some kind of universal resonance. China is just a context, just the material background of the story. The purpose is to create something new, not just to tell something that's already there to another group of people.

Bookforum: Does Chinese influence your English prose style?

HJ: Yes, especially in fiction. In fact, I try to make use of the Chinese language, especially in dialogue. For instance, many characters in my fiction are Chinese. When they speak, I hear them speak in Chinese. Occasionally, I pick up some idioms, some slightly odd expressions or distorted English. Chinese is always in the back of my mind when I'm writing in English, as a kind of reference.

Bookforum: Your writing seems to shy from present-day China. Is this a fair characterization?

HJ: I think it would be fair to say that I wouldn't write about current China. I can write it from a different angle, but from the very front, to write about the everyday reality: that would be hard. Because I'm not allowed to go back to China, I'm not familiar with the everyday life. I know a lot about it, but I can't smell the air or interact with people on the street. It doesn't have that intimacy anymore. As a writer in my position, I have to figure out how to say my story and use the space available to me. In that sense, maybe the current



China cannot be my subject matter anymore.

Bookforum: When writing about historical subjects, how do you negotiate the line between fiction and fact?

HJ: History is full of fragments of events and happenings. They are not coherent stories. A writer, especially a fiction writer, has to create an order for these happenings. Most of the time, I don't invent details, but I pick them up from different books and try to unify them in a line of drama. For instance, there was a mad woman, Yulan, that Minnie mentioned in her diary. This was just one sentence, but I expanded it into a line of drama.

Bookforum: Much of your work is concerned with Mao and post-Mao China. Does *Nanjing Requiem*, with its start date of November 1937, represent the furthest back in Chinese history that you have thus far explored?

HJ: This book, on the surface, might be some kind of retreat back into Chinese history. But, to some extent, it is also an American experience, because the hero of the book is an American missionary. Also, the book describes a group of American missionaries. So, in that sense, it is another kind of unique space. It is not just about a Chinese historical event: it is a kind of international event.

Bookforum: How did you first come to Minnie Vautrin's story?

HJ: I read Iris Chang's non-fiction book, *The Rape of Nanking*, and she mentioned her. Later I read her diary and a biography published by the University of Illinois. Gradually, she took form in my mind.

Bookforum: In *The Rape of Nanking*, Chang recounts Japan's inability and refusal to grapple with the atrocities it committed, not only in 1937, but during the entire second Sino-Japanese war. Was your choice to write about the Rape of Nanjing motivated at all by Chang's account of these so-called "cover ups"?

HJ: That was not my concern at all. The massacre, the atrocities, did happen—that is clear. But I didn't want to expose that: that would be a non-fiction book's job. A fiction writer tries to tell a good story. If a book is well done, some kind of additional or even extraneous role might be given to the author. But that is not essential. For me, the task was a literary, artistic problem, because if the book was not good, the other roles wouldn't mean anything. I think that, essentially, a good writer must be an artist. The most important thing was to make the book into a piece of art. That would be the ultimate ambition: a book that can stand on its own, that has its own autonomy. It can be explained or interpreted in different ways, but it always has its own vitality. And, of course, Minnie was on my mind all the time. I intended to put her soul at peace, because to me she was a hero. But she was neglected, perhaps partly because she took her own life. So I really wanted to just make a good story out of her experience.

Bookforum: Most of your writing is either narrated from a male perspective or features a man as its protagonist. Yet, *Nanjing Requiem* features both a female narrator, Anling, and a female protagonist. What was the motivation behind this choice?

HJ: Minnie Vautrin, she was a really major figure and was briefly celebrated in Nanjing as a kind of legendary figure. Then she was suppressed by the Communist media. I wanted to write a story about her because this, for me, could be a point of entry to the historical tragedy. Also, if the book was done well, it would make the Chinese experience part of the international experience. Structurally and conceptually, that was the approach. The reason why I decided to create a female narrator is that I had to invent a character who knew Minnie intimately. I needed a woman of similar age who had her own family and her own

losses. The book demanded a narrator like Anling. It could not be a man at all.

Bookforum: Many critics have described your writing as minimal, almost like reportage.

HJ: I think perhaps it's because I started as a poet, so I couldn't be very expansive. My first draft is always short. I don't think it's a matter of language. It's just a way of writing, or maybe temperament. Some writers, their first draft is messy and big. For me, it has always been the opposite.

Bookforum: Are there any other projects on your horizon?

HJ: I think that I will write about people who live in the peripheral sphere, between China and the United States. My next book will have that kind of setting, perhaps in North America, though it would, of course, involve mainland China and Taiwan. In other words, I have to invent an international space for my stories.

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sukhasanthi
December 20, 2011
5:36 am

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Nice terminology.

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