

ASIAN AMERICAN

L I T E R A T U R E

Reviews and Criticism of Works by
American Writers of Asian Descent

Lawrence J. Trudeau, Editor

with advisors

David Henry Hwang, Ravindra N. Sharma, Kenneth Yamashita



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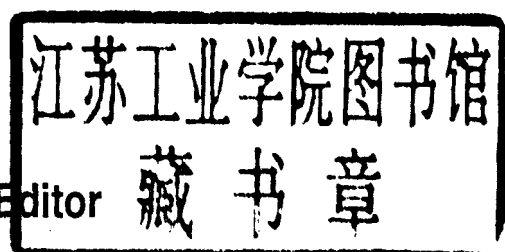
DETROIT • LONDON

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DAVID MURA

1952-

INTRODUCTION

Mura is a poet, playwright, and essayist who has distinguished himself in all three genres. His collection of poetry, *After We Lost Our Way*, won the National Poetry Series competition in 1989, the year of its publication. *Turning Japanese: Memoirs of a Sansei* (1991), chronicling Mura's childhood in the United States and the year he spent in Japan, won the 1991 Josephine Miles Book Award from the Oakland chapter of International P.E.N. His other awards include numerous fellowships and grants, a Fanny Fay Wood Memorial Prize from the American Academy of Poets (1977); Creative Nonfiction Prizes from Milkweed (1985) and The Loft (1987); a Discovery/Nation Award (1987); a Pushcart Prize (1990); and a Loft McKnight Award of Distinction for poetry (1992). A second collection of poems, *The Colors of Desire*, was published in 1995. Mura has also written and performed a theater piece entitled *Relocations: Images from a Japanese American* (1990), and a play, *Invasion* (1993). His *A Male Grief: Notes on Pornography and Addiction* (1987) and *Where the Body Meets Memory: An Odyssey of Race, Sexuality, and Identity* (1995) are frank investigations of sexuality in America, particularly the effects of race, culture, and politics on Asian American male sexual identity. Mura's poems and essays have also been published widely in magazines and anthologies.

REVIEWS AND CRITICISM

Jay McInerney (essay date 1991)

SOURCE: "Feeling American—Sort Of," in *The New York Times Book Review*, 31 March 1991, p. 10.

[In the following review of *Turning Japanese*, McInerney admires the "intriguing perspective" Mura brings to "the New World quest for enlightenment."]

The literature of Western encounters with Japan has, in recent years, become a thriving subgenre of the English-language coming-of-age story, Tokyo and Kyoto having lately replaced Paris as hot stops on the *Wanderjahre*. In his memoir *Turning Japanese*, the poet David Mura brings an intriguing perspective to the New World quest for enlightenment from this ancient and ascendant culture, being himself a sansei—a third-generation Japanese-American.

Mr. Mura's curiously reluctant voyage begins when he applies for a U.S./Japan Creative Artist Exchange Fellowship, "mainly because I wanted time to write." For reasons that become clearer as the journey progresses, he initially pro-

tests too much his lack of interest in the country where his grandparents were born. Growing up in a largely Jewish suburb of Chicago, Mr. Mura ate Japanese dishes mainly on holidays, cheered from the sofa the G.I.'s who mowed down advancing hordes of fiendish Japanese on television. His parents seldom spoke about their roots, or about their years in relocation camps during the war. The son cultivated a Eurocentric world view, immersing himself in Sartre, Barthes, Benjamin, Foucault and Levi-Strauss—all copiously quoted here. But his poems, he tells us, were about relocation camps, his Japanese grandfather, Hiroshima bomb victims. "My imagination," he writes, "had been traveling there for years, unconsciously swimming the Pacific, against the tide of my family's emigration, my parents' desire, after the internment camps, to forget the past."

Still, like the schoolboy who feigns indifference to the ponytailed object of his affections, the author seems to have to drag himself and his wife, Susie, to Tokyo for a year—fiercely pretending to be just another Yankee. He immediately confronts the difference between his Caucasian wife's perspective and his own (with what might have been disastrous consequences for their marriage, except that Susie's patience and devotion seem nearly boundless and saintly). For the white American visitor the dichotomy is simple, but Mr. Mura is stuck somewhere between *them* and *us*. He looks Japanese; he can blend in if he keeps his mouth shut. When they meet another young American couple who are overwhelmingly critical of Japan, Mr. Mura feels the need to defend the Japanese. Later, on a train, he whispers to his wife, not wanting the commuters around them to know that he's a foreigner. "To speak English on the train created an island, separated me from the people around us," he writes. In this context, the tall, slim, *bakujin* wife is the equivalent of the shiksa spouse in the fiction of writers like Philip Roth; Mr. Mura is both proud of her as a trophy and ashamed of the way she sticks out and blows his cover.

Drawing on his own history of repressed racial self-consciousness, Mr. Mura is quite good on the sexual politics of race. Good liberal though he is, he is not afraid to talk about racial stereotypes, and even, finally, about race itself. The Japanese themselves are unabashed racialists. When Mr. Mura begins to study Noh drama, he finds that his teacher expects more from him than from his friend Daniel, who is a trained mime. "'You have Japanese genes,' Okinaka would tell me. 'You are Japanese in your blood. You should understand these things.' My ingrained American outlook rebelled at this. Blood had nothing to do with ability; blood was a racist, a fascist notion." And yet, even before this conversation, Mr. Mura has begun to consider the claims of race,

as he finds aspects of his own character in the local demeanor.

The New Yorker (essay date 1991)

SOURCE: A review of *Turning Japanese*, in *The New Yorker*, Vol. LXVII, No. 8, 15 April 1991, p. 104.

[In this evaluation, the critic notes: "There is brilliant writing in [*Turning Japanese*], observations of Japanese humanity and culture that are subtly different from and more penetrating than what we usually get from Westerners."]

The author [of *Turning Japanese: Memoirs of a Sansei*], a poet, is a sansei, a third-generation Japanese-American, whose parents had been in American concentration ("relocation") camps during the Second World War. He grew up in a Jewish neighborhood of Chicago, and spoke no Japanese. In 1984, he won a grant to write and study in Japan for a year; this book is his account of the experience. Mr. Mura, who had always felt inferior because of his race, records his initial shock at finding himself among people who looked like him but with whom he couldn't communicate. Acclimatization was slow but sure. He accumulated friends, most of them English-speaking Japanese—artists, writers, dancers, and intellectuals—and he tells of strenuous bouts of eating and drinking in Tokyo restaurants and bars with them. (The alcohol intake of the Japanese is astonishing, but, Mr. Mura says, the idea of Alcoholics Anonymous is mystifying to them.) There is brilliant writing in this book, observations of Japanese humanity and culture that are subtly different from and more penetrating than what we usually get from Westerners.

Karl Taro Greenfield (essay date 1991)

SOURCE: "Japanese-American Limbo," in *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, 28 April 1991, p. 10.

[In the review below, Greenfield stresses that Mura's voice in *Turning Japanese* is uniquely Japanese American.]

For second- and third-generation Japanese Americans—Nissei and Sansei—returning to Japan can be frightening, educating and enlightening. For Japanese-American writers, that experience is essential to understanding how our cultural heritage differs from that of other American writers.

We came of age in America, often of middle-class and upper-middle-class backgrounds. And though we stood out in class pictures and Little League team photos as the only Asian faces, culturally we identified with America. But when the self-consciousness of adolescence fell away, we became curious about *why* our Japanese-American family was different. We became curious about our nation of origin: Japan.

The big question lingers for Japanese Americans, both as people and as writers: In what ways are we Japanese and in what ways American?

Sansei poet David Mura in *Turning Japanese* tries to understand himself, his family, his heritage and his writing—in other words, his entire being—during a year spent in Japan on U.S./Japan Creative Artist Fellowship.

David Mura himself, product of a Jewish suburb of Chicago, had "insisted on my Americanness, had shunned most connections with Japan and felt proud I knew no Japanese." Combine this with statements such as "I have always been terrified of travel. . . . My only other trip outside the country had been two weeks on an island off Cancun; my reaction to that trip was an astonished 'I spent two weeks out of the country and did not die,'" and you have a Japanese-American better suited for a trip to the Chicago Metropolitan Library than to Japan. "I wanted to read about the world. But go there? Never."

But go there Mura does, accompanied by his Caucasian wife Suzie. He studies *butoh*, a form of radical Japanese dance, becomes fascinated by Noh, fraternizes with some radicals and writers and struggles to learn Japanese. (Mura doesn't seem to care that discos and hostess bars probably are more relevant to understanding contemporary Japan than are Noh plays or Kabuki.) He is in a cultural wonderland, trying to sort out and appreciate Japan; through that sifting, he discovers himself.

Mura, in his wide-eyed gawk at Tokyo, successfully captures some subtle nuances of the Japanese-American experience in Japan, particularly the unfamiliar feeling of fitting in visually with the majority for the first time in his life. Meanwhile, Suzie, who has completed her medical internship in the United States, is unable to find professional satisfaction in Japan, as most male Japanese doctors and researchers look at her—because of her race and gender—as a novelty rather than a colleague.

But it is in flashback sequences of his childhood that Mura's writing takes on a poignancy and terseness lacking in the Tokyo chapters. He outlines honestly the struggles that Japanese-Americans face when dating Caucasian women. All teen-age boys are awkward around girls; put a racial spin on that and imagine the acne-inducing stress that further handicaps minorities when they want to date white women.

Those like Mura, the children of the interned, have their own unique emotional baggage. In their parents there is a constant reminder that their race is enough to justify total disenfranchisement and forcible removal and worse. So the trip to Japan can be a search for the nation where they do fit in, where, if there is another Manzanar, they won't be sent because they are the majority this time. But too often, for the Japanese Americans, they discover that here too they are not accepted. In Japan they may not be discriminated against because of race but instead for other reasons:

poor Japanese-speaking ability, un-Japanese mannerisms, or simply because here, too, they are viewed as foreigners.

Perhaps we don't fit in either nation, America or Japan. That is the greatest dilemma of all, particularly for the intellectual. Before Mura arrived in Japan he was preoccupied by Western literary culture—Foucault, Benjamin, Sontag, etc.—but as his year in Japan draws to a close, he discovers he can never be a writer like them because his own intellectual tradition, genetically and verbally, is not purely Western: “I can't just write like a white American writer; I'm not John Updike; I can't write about four white people talking about their divorce at the table. . . . That sort of despair doesn't interest me.”

Like a generation of Jewish writers who were liberated by the vernacular voices of Saul Bellow or Phillip Roth, David Mura has realized his own voice must organically reflect his upbringing in a household where imperfect English was spoken. That is the Japanese-American writer's only hope in literature for what American trade negotiators demand in business: a level playing field. We can't write like descendants of New England Puritans or Jewish immigrants, Mura suggests, but we can write like Japanese Americans. And that writing, encompassing both how we are Japanese and American, will be a significant voice in American letters.

David Mura with Bill Moyers (interview date 1995)

SOURCE: “David Mura,” in *The Language of Life: A Festival of Poets*, Doubleday, 1995, pp. 301-18.

[In the interview below, Mura discusses the influence of his family history on his writing.]

[Bill Moyers]: How do you arrive at metaphors like those in “The Colors of Desire”? You write that “the sidewalk’s rolling, buckling, like lava melting.”

[David Mura]: That line happened largely through sound. When I talk about writing poetry with students, I tell them not to go in a straight line and not to think what they would logically think. Then the question becomes, “How do you proceed in a non-logical way which lets your imagination and your unconscious out?” One way is simply by associating through sound. For example, in that particular line I think I got to “rolling” fairly straightforwardly, but then I start associating simply by sound, so “buckling” takes the “l” from “rolling” and the “k” from “sidewalk” and combines them together.

Such poetry is written for the tongue, the lips.

Yes, and reliance on sound releases your unconscious because those associations are happening through rhythm and music and not through any type of logic. So your unconscious, what is really creative inside you, is bubbling up.

MAJOR WORKS

- A Male Grief: Notes on Pornography and Addiction: An Essay* (nonfiction) 1987
After We Lost Our Way (poetry) 1989
Relocations: Images from a Japanese American (performance piece) 1990
Turning Japanese: Memoirs of a Sansei (memoir) 1991
Invasion (play) 1993
The Colors of Desire: Poems (poetry) 1995
Where the Body Meets Memory: An Odyssey of Race, Sexuality, and Identity (nonfiction) 1995

There's still a bias in this country that says unless it rhymes, it's not poetry.

I write in many different forms—some poems are in free verse and some may look like free verse, but they actually have the ghost of blank verse in them. I also write some poems which are very long-lined and which have a much more prosy rhythm. I find that I can achieve different tones and voices by working in various forms. For instance, at times I can get a more meditative abstract language in long lines which I can't get in short lines because for me such language just doesn't fit into the small line.

Sometime, instead of placing the rhyme at the end of a line, I'll bury it in the middle of a line, but the music is still there. An example is my poem “Open & Shut”:

Here is the rose of history. Pull the petals apart.
 A faint murmuring starts, then shouting, shrieking,
 an interminable roar. So you close the rose, call it
 simple, a rose without history, innocent, eternal.

The rhymes between “simple” and “eternal” are buried within the line. As I'm writing, I'm hearing those rhymes, but I'm slightly fiddling against the form to fight the feeling of monotonous regularity.

“The rose of history”—what is that metaphor saying to the reader?

Well, I think of it as two poles between which my poetry exists—the tension on the one hand between the moment of the aesthetic and the beautiful, the concern with form and the timeless, the lyrical moment, and on the other hand, the process of history which is often brutal and unjust, and also filled with stories and lives which go neglected and unrecorded.

The process of history is often permeated by a darkness that people don't want to look at, but I want my poetry to be a combination of those *two* things. I think that if poetry

gets too far towards the realm of the aesthetic, the formal, and the beautiful and doesn't acknowledge the other side of existence—the history that we live in, the changes and the darkness of history—then the life goes out of poetry, and it becomes an escape.

The rose in the rubble. The rose is innocent, but history is not. Throughout your poetry you grapple with what it means to be neither black nor white. You seem to live in a country in between.

There is a moment in my poem "The Colors of Desire" when my father gets on a segregated bus while he is in the internment camp in Jerome, Arkansas, during World War II—the Japanese American internees were allowed to get out of the camps on weekend passes—and the question he faces is, "Where do you sit?" When I asked my father where he sat, he said that the whites urged the Japanese American internees to sit in the front of the bus while the blacks urged them to sit in the back of the bus.

The Japanese Americans tended to sit in the front of the bus, and one of the ways I talk about this is to say that America has often offered Asian Americans honorary white status, but that status is predicated on a deal—you get to sit in the front of the bus and to be an honorary white, but you don't get to sit at the *very* front of the bus. Also, you don't *ever* get to drive the bus. Also, you must pay *no* attention to what's happening to the people on the back of the bus. You must claim *no* relationship to the people in the back of the bus. You must absolutely *never* do anything to change the status of the people in the back of the bus. And if you agree to *all* of these conditions, we will consider you an honorary white.

When I came to that image of my father stepping on a segregated bus, I realized that Asian Americans—and in my case, Japanese Americans—often think of our identity simply in relation to our own community or in relationship to white society. But in actuality, when my father gets on that bus his identity is already formed against the matrix of black-white relations, and the decision that he makes to sit in the front of the bus is an historically understandable decision because he's sitting where the power is.

But in 1994 that's a decision we have to reconsider. I think much of the mistrust that many African Americans feel toward Asian Americans arises from the historical fact that many of us have settled for this honorary white status. And yet, as an Asian American and as a Japanese American, I've learned a lot about who I am from writers like James Baldwin, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, black poets like Amiri Baraka, and the black West Indian psychologist Franz Fanon.

What is something you learned from them?

I learned about my own identity. When Franz Fanon writes that the black school child in the French West Indies reads about our ancestors the Gauls and then about how the great white hunter went into Africa to civilize the savages, Fanon

says the child learns self-hatred, self-alienation, and identification with the oppressor. I read that and I said, "Oh. That's what I've been doing."

Your people weren't on the Mayflower.

That's right, and because I grew up under the assimilation model of the 1950s when you were encouraged to lose your ethnic heritage, I actively tried to blend in and assume a middle-class white identity. Even when I was a very young poet, the poets with whom I identified were Robert Lowell and John Berryman.

Both white.

Yes, both white upper class . . .

And established.

Yes, established and Ivy League educated. At that time I was in a sense saying, "Don't call me an Asian American poet. Don't call me a Japanese American poet. Don't call me a poet of color. I don't want to be in a literary ghetto. I don't want to be part of some literary affirmative action. I want to be a *writer!*" But I was really just feeling uncomfortable about who I was; I was internalizing the racial hierarchy that I had learned growing up, and I wanted to put a distance between myself and other Asian Americans. . . .

You write "Father, mother, / I married a woman not of my color. / What is it I want to escape?" Have you answered that?

No, that's a question I'm constantly investigating because one of the things my work is about is the conjunction between race and sexuality, and I think that is an area which American culture has not investigated nearly enough. I believe there is a conjunction between those whom you hire and those whom you desire. People think that the realm of individual sexual desire ought to be kept separate from the public question of affirmative action—who is hired, quotas, things like that—but even as a young person, it became very apparent to me that there were standards of white beauty and of masculinity to which I, an Asian American male, couldn't ever relate.

I didn't really understand any of this until I began to read Franz Fanon's discussion about how black men who are fascinated by white women have really bought into the racial hierarchy because they think that sleeping with white women will make them equal to white men. I read that and, again, I said, "Oh. That's what I've been doing."

So when I addressed the question of my love for my wife in "The Colors of Desire," I knew it was a very complicated matter, and I did not want to bury any aspects of it under the table. My wife is three quarters WASP, one quarter Austrian Hungarian Jew, and her WASP side goes all the way back to the *Mayflower*. A lot of people want to say that love is color blind, but that has not been my experience. I

think that idea makes people less interesting and less complicated than they actually are.

What does poetry do that helps you cope with these desires and fears that you haven't been able to reconcile?

Poetry allows me to bring them together, to combine and compress the complexity of my experience so I can comprehend it, and at the same time, understand my relationship to the past and to the world around me. T. S. Eliot said that a poet is "constantly amalgamating disparate experience," and in my poems I'm often bringing together *very* disparate experience. "The Colors of Desire" starts off with a lynching, then my father is getting on a segregated bus, then the poem goes to an incident where I'm fighting with my brother in our bedroom when I'm a child, then to the discovery of a *Playboy* in my father's closet, then to my mother in Hart Mountain internment camp, and finally to myself listening to my wife's belly when she's pregnant with our first child. In the poem all of these things are connected, so the poem helped me to see *how* they are connected, and I think it also helped me to go on with my life.

I should say here that my early poems were often about Japanese and Japanese American subjects, so even while I was saying, "I'm just a *writer*. Don't label me!" my creativity was already pulling me toward that material. Had I not been a writer, had I not been pushed by what I feel is a writerly duty to look for the truth of your life in the world around you, to drive into those complexities and contradictions, I think I might have ended up so messed up that I could conceivably be dead now; and that's not just melodramatic because there was a point in my late twenties where my identity simply fell apart. I indulged in a lot of self-destructive behavior—drugs and drinking and promiscuity—all of which I think was fueled by self-hatred and rage that I didn't understand.

Does poetry take you back into the past, help you to discover the origins of your present confusion and rage?

Yes, poetry does do that for me.

Writing is how I hear my own voice confronting me, saying that you're trying to excuse yourself with all these explanations—you're trying to say, "It's my family. It's history. It's race," when you know it's actually your *own* nature. It's who *you are*—your *own* nature is where this lust and perversions reside. There is something in me which does believe in original sin—I don't believe we're ever born innocent and I think that's okay.

You write about addiction to pornography. You're asking some challenging questions about your own nature.

In my second book, *The Colors of Desire*, I have a poem called "Pornography Abandoned" about a man abandoning pornography, and in my first book, *After We Lost Our Way*, I have another poem, "The Bookstore," about a

man going to a pornographic bookstore. The rhetoric of *Playboy* or *Oui* or *Penthouse* takes for granted that consuming pornography is a natural and pleasurable hedonistic activity, but in a poem like "The Bookstore" I show a detailed examination of somebody going to one of those book stores, and it's really a re-creation of some private hell—a man sitting in a booth watching a pornographic film and masturbating.

It's a picture of *extreme* alienation, of being cut off from any real human communication with other people. After reading the poem I think you have to ask, is this man's experience pleasurable? In his experience something that anybody would logically want to undergo?

When I read that poem I felt the sadness in it.

Yes, but the problem is that the man involved in that activity can't express that sadness. I also think that beneath his experience there's an anger at being alienated and an anger at not being able to communicate what he most deeply yearns for.

He's feeling inadequate?

Yes, and you have to ask where that inadequacy comes from. Is it something that's natural? When I was a member of several men's groups and therapy groups I saw that, in general, this was learned behavior that came through dysfunctional family systems in which people could not communicate about their sexuality and where the men grew up feeling shameful about their bodies.

Nobody gave them a language to talk their own feelings, and therefore they grew up incredibly angry and sad but without any way of expressing that. So pornography comes to be used almost like a drug to deaden feelings and to enter this reverie, but when the reverie ends, where are you? You're in the same place where you started.

Pornography is very public now. It's not kept off the street, in cubbyholes, it's everywhere. What does this say to you about our society?

Well, it's a very sad state and, in certain ways, I think it's a logical progression of capitalism. I mean, what *is* the logic of capitalism? If you can sell it, sell it. There's no morality there. There's no boundary. We don't say, "Here's something we *don't* sell." It's *all* about making a profit, and with pornography you have something which is consumed like a drug, which can be consumed over and over again, and which always leaves you feeling that you need another fix—that's the perfect engine for a capitalist society.

So you think the market is driving pornography?

Yes, but we are only in a very incipient stage. I think women have been a lot more articulate about the harm that pornography does towards them than men have been about the harm that it does towards men. I think women have, in



David Mura

general, obviously been much more articulate about the ways that traditional sexual roles and traditional ways of looking at sexuality have damaged them. Men have been damaged as well, but they have barely begun to articulate the damage that has been done to them.

It strikes me that in your own story you are suggesting that this inadequacy and your transient addiction to pornography issued from a conflict of family history and alienation.

Yes, I think it *does* go back to the image I had of myself as an adolescent boy, feeling incredibly inadequate and going, for instance, to my first boy/girl party and suddenly realizing when they played spin the bottle that I was different. I was the lone Japanese American amid a group of white kids, and suddenly there was a barrier there, and I couldn't quite articulate what the barrier was.

The poem about your wife's grandfather ["Grandfather-in-Law"] intrigues me. . . .

I married into an old WASP family, on my wife's mother's side—they go all the way back to the *Mayflower*—and when we met, my wife told me that her grandfather was prejudiced against Albanians. That was a new one to me! I think this poem is about that confrontation with an old WASP

family which, in many ways, was probably even more familiar to me than a Japanese American family because when I was growing up that's what I read about and those were also the images that I'd seen in movies and on TV.

I read about the Pilgrims and the *Mayflower*, but in my history books I didn't read about Japanese American immigrants coming to America. So in certain ways, it was ironically natural for me to be in that family, even though the grandfather had misgivings about his granddaughter's being with me; but the poem is really about forgiveness. I think it's about forgiving him for who he was and for his prejudice against me; and it also deals with the irony that when he says, "Don't make a mistake with your life, Susie. Don't make a mistake," in certain ways he was right because, in the early parts of our relationship, I was not faithful. A lot of that unfaithfulness was fueled by my own sense of inadequacy about issues of race that I couldn't articulate and, from one point of view, my wife probably should have left me then.

You confess that her grandfather may have been right in saying to her, "Don't marry David Mura."

Yes, but he was *not* right in the way that he thought he was right. He thought she shouldn't marry somebody of another race, and in the poem I'm saying she shouldn't marry somebody who is being a real jerk to her. This poem was written after a period when my wife and I both entered therapy to deal with all these issues, and in dealing with them we had to take apart our relationship and put it back together. The poem expresses my gratitude for her acceptance of me and for her willingness to go through that process of rebuilding our relationship which led to her ultimately forgiving me, and it is also about my work to forgive myself and to go on with my life.

Forgive yourself for what? What was this demon?

The demon was rage, rage at racism and rage at the fact that nobody recognized the racism. I would try to talk about it, and people would look and say, "What are you *talking* about?" That still happens—*Miss Saigon* is a Broadway hit, but most Asian American artists think it's an abomination that perpetuates racist stereotypes. Thousands and thousands of people go to see it and millions and millions of dollars are made off what I perceive as a racist musical. When I talk about it to certain people, they have no idea what I'm talking about. It's as if I've come from outer space.

As enraging as this response is, it's understandable because those people have never been given any context to understand who I am or how I would interpret what's up there on that stage. They just think, "Oh, *Miss Saigon*, it's a sweet story about love and death." They don't think about how it perpetuates a very constant image in our culture of a white male with an Asian female who is in various ways submissive and pining for him. That image goes all the way back to *Madama Butterfly*, and it's deeply embedded in popular

culture. For instance, when Alan Parker wants to make a movie about the internment camps, who's going to be the hero of the internment camp film? Is it Sab Shimono? Is it James Shigeta? No. It's Dennis Quaid! In the film *Come See the Paradise*, Dennis Quaid is an Irish American married to a Nisei woman. And I have to ask, "Why do *that*? Why can't you center the story on a Nisei couple, especially since almost all my parents' generation *did* marry other Japanese Americans?"

The argument many people make is that you need a white entry into the world of Japanese Americans, but *I've* been seeing films with white faces since I was born and *I* had no trouble entering *those* films. When I went to Japan for the first time in 1985, I had a curious experience which I think is very telling—Japan was my first experience of being surrounded by a culture where everybody looked like me, even all the images on TV looked like me, and it felt wonderful! While I was there I went to see *Out of Africa* in which Meryl Streep plays the Danish author Isak Dinesen. When Streep arrives at her Kenyan plantation and all the black hands come out to greet her, I found myself watching this white face in the center of the film and suddenly saying, "I'm bored with this!" I've seen the white bwana in Africa over and over again, but what I'm really interested in is what is happening in the minds of the Kenyans because I know that in twenty or thirty years they're going to form the Mau Maus and kick the Europeans out. Something is changing their consciousness, and *that* is what I'm really interested in.

I felt I was withdrawing affection, attention, curiosity—which I naturally gave to the Meryl Streep face in the center of the film—and giving it instead to those black faces on the margins. Suddenly the world looked different to me, and I realized that that's part of what racism is. Discrimination is not just shouting insults, or jobs; it's how you react emotionally when you see a face: Are you curious about that face? Do you feel affectionate towards that face? Do you feel a desire to understand and to know what's going on in that person's interior life? Does that face seem a blank? Do you even *see* that face? Do you just put that face to the margins?

Subdued rage runs through "A Nisei Picnic: From an Album." That's your uncle's story. . . .

Yes. He was a member of the famous 442nd Infantry Division, and he was injured. I looked at him as a hero, as a Japanese American John Wayne. It was only later that I learned that internment politics were much more complicated than that.

He fought for the U.S. against the Nazis, yet when he came back from the war and couldn't find an apartment, he wasn't angry. How do you explain that?

There's a Japanese expression which I quote in the poem, *shikatta ga nai*, which means "It can't be helped." It's like our expression "What can you do?" You can either rage and rage against it or you can just live with it. I think people

make that decision constantly about things that happen in their lives. All of us experience various injustices, and at times for our own sanity and peace of mind we decide, "What can you do? It can't be helped." But there are points in history when that attitude snaps, and suddenly it *can* be helped, we *can* do something about it.

Not getting an apartment is wrong. I *can* protest against that, and it's worthwhile for me to get angry about it. It's worthwhile for me to work to change it, and the means exist by which I *can* change that situation.

In "An Argument: on 1942" your mother says, "I know, it's all / part of your job, your way . . ." What does she mean? . . .

I think she knows that it's part of my job as a poet to dig up the truths that everybody wants to bury under the table, but she wants to say, "Look how far we have come. The past is past." I want to honor that viewpoint by having her voice in the poem, because what I finally believe is that it's not *my* viewpoint which is true. We require *both* viewpoints, which is the reality of the Japanese American experience.

I love to write poetry instead of essays because I don't have to argue a point in poems. In a way, I do argue points in poems, but in "The Colors of Desire," for example, I get to give my father's voice, his version. In "An Argument," I get to give my mother's version of the past, and in each case readers have to deal with the complication of these two different voices and two different interpretations of the past—my parents' and mine.

Who is speaking in "Letters from a Tule Lake Internment Camp (1942-45)"?

An *Issei*—first-generation Japanese American—man who's been separated from his wife. Often the leaders of the Japanese American communities were taken away first—before the official camps were set up at the beginning of World War II—so he's writing to his wife who is in another camp.

The position of the *Issei* was very complicated. They were put in camps and then asked to sign a loyalty oath. "Do you forswear allegiance to the emperor and swear allegiance to the United States? And will you serve in the armed forces?" Even the women were asked to sign this oath. But the *Issei* by law were not allowed to become U.S. citizens, so if they signed the loyalty oath they were left without a country—they had no citizenship. Yet many of them signed anyway. So in that poem the man asks what country he's in because he's almost stateless.

He was accused of no crime, there was no trial, there was no habeas corpus, so he asks, "Where am I?" He's lost his nursery, which he worked all his life to build up, he's lost his house, his possessions. Most of the *Issei* never recovered economically after the war. One of my grandfathers owned a nursery, the other owned a thriving produce store; and they both lost everything. After the war the best they could

do was that one grandfather was hired as a janitor in a hotel. That was it!

How do you come to terms with the moral idealism of America and these brutal realities in your family history?

I have faith on some level in the promise of America, but I want to hold America and all of us to that promise. I believe it's important to have that ideal out there—it's one of the terrific things about this country—but, at the same time, the only way we're going to reach that ideal is by seeing the ways in which we failed in the past because the past explains what's here now. I think when you change the telling of the past, you actually change the present. Poets here at the festival like myself and Marilyn Chin and Michael Harper and Sekou Sundiata and Naomi Shihab Nye and Victor Hernández Cruz and many, many more throughout the country are layering all sorts of other histories on the history that has been allowed into the schoolbooks. I think we are creating a fuller and more complete picture of what America always was so that history can help us to recognize what is happening in America today. Suddenly the people no one paid attention to are here with their stories. Suddenly, a tremendous world-class novelist like Toni Morrison and a whole array of other black authors compel our attention, and we realize there is a history of African Americans and a present for African Americans as well, and we have to pay attention to *all* of it.

A poem is fact, history, and fiction. What makes it true?

First of all, I would say the poem is my subjective vision, and it is up to readers and listeners to take in the subjective visions of each poet and to weave those visions into their understanding of what the world is.

When the readers and listeners do that, suddenly there's more information available, other voices are coming in, and they have to listen to those voices. Some of what those voices say may be true, some of what those voices say may not be true, but the readers and listeners certainly have to deal with the presence of those people whose voices they have absorbed.

So if I am able to write poems with a certain beauty and resonance, and if that beauty and resonance has truth, then the readers and listeners have no choice but to reckon with that truth.

Paula Friedman (essay date 1996)

SOURCE: A review of *Where the Body Meets Memory: An Odyssey of Race, Sexuality, and Identity*, in *The New York Times Book Review*, 28 July 1996, p. 18.

[Friedman offers a favorable assessment of *Where the Body Meets Memory*.]

David Mura's eloquent meditation on desire, race and identity, *Where the Body Meets Memory*, illustrates the ways that social attitudes can distort the sense of self and invade the most intimate relations. As a *sansei*, or third-generation Japanese-American, Mr. Mura grew up knowing that his parents and grandparents had been placed in internment camps during World War II. Perhaps even more insidiously undermining to Mr. Mura's sense of self were the racial stereotypes he absorbed and his obsession with pornography and sexual conquest, with the objects of his desire almost exclusively white women. Mr. Mura, a poet, traces his compulsive longings and behavior to a sense of shame over his ethnicity. He felt trapped: either he could conform, as his father did, to the white stereotype of the Asian as a "model minority"—hardworking, compliant, nonsexual—or he could attempt to explode these stereotypes by desperately pursuing his own fantasies, created in reaction to those he felt were imposed upon him. The slow and arduous work toward self-awareness reflected in *Where the Body Meets Memory* released Mr. Mura from both unsatisfying positions.

Robert Grotjohn (essay date 1997)

SOURCE: A review of *The Colors of Desire*, in *Amerasia Journal*, Vol. 23, No. 1, 1997, pp. 183-87.

[In the following, Grotjohn reads the works in *The Colors of Desire* as confessional poetry.]

The predominant form of David Mura's *The Colors of Desire* is the poetic sequence (eight of fifteen poems). The sequences develop complexities, or "complexions," as Mura puns it, through sometimes fragmenting shifts in form, voice, persona, perspective, and time as Mura interrogates various possibilities for his own siting within the colors of desire. The formal fragmentation gradually diminishes until, by the end of the volume, the poems show more consistent form and voice as Mura emerges from his morass of complexities to a tempered acceptance of his situation.

This is confessional poetry, and Mura's confessional self-absorption can be exasperating, especially his recurring fascination with himself as victim of his "addiction" to pornography. The first of the volume's four sections concentrates on this "addiction." In the first part of "The Colors of Desire," Mura jumps from describing a photograph of a 1930s lynching, to his father leaving the Jerome, Arkansas camp by bus and being invited by both white and rear-sitting blacks to sit with them, to a memory of himself watching a pornographic movie of

black and blond, almost a joke but for the surge of what those lynchers urged as the ultimate crime against nature: the black man kneeling to this kidnapped

body, slipping himself in, the screen showing it all . . .

A few lines later he asks, "where am I, / the missing third?" That question suggests the absence of Asian American males from America's sexual consciousness. That absence, along with the desires promulgated by the production of the American feminine ideal as a blue-eyed blond with enormous breasts, the sort of woman he discovers in his father's magazines, helps cause the "addiction" to which he is victim. Despite Mura's justification of his victimhood, I am tempted to ask the question Mura puts in his father's mouth: "Is nothing in your life your own volition?"

But Mura puts that question in his father's mouth, and he accepts that volition in the next poem, "Chorus on the Origins of His Lust." The "chorus," a contemporary version of Shakespeare's Edmund (*King Lear* l.ii), accuses him of "merely the excellent sophistry / of the age" in blaming "guards in the towers / at Minidoka, Jerome" for the "origins" of his pornographic lust. "Nonsense," the chorus cries, "Cock, bull, you made these disasters." Mura answers, "Yes, yes, I acknowledge my own." He contradicts this acknowledgment in "Lovers and Sons," a sequence from the second section, when he asks, "Who knows where these obsessions start? / My father's lost sexual desires? My own wayward past?" He answers, "The internment, surely the internment." Then again, in a modification of his reversal and his surety, he asks two more questions later in the poem:

Are there nights I dream of the camps,
my father roughhousing among boys bound
for the white dust of the ball diamond (and later
Europe)?

Or am I guilty of—exploiting isn't quite the word—
am I responsible for a certain posturing and false
purity,
an infantile predilection to see myself with the victims?

—I don't know. Each morning, I can't recall a thing.

His "I don't know" captures the ambiguities of this volume. Does he not know whether he dreams or whether he is only posturing? When I begin to suspect him of posturing, even exploiting, he raises these self-aware questions and destabilizes any easy categorization of his stance.

"Lovers and Sons" is immediately preceded by another sequence, "The Blueness of the Day," in which Mura devotes the first of four parts to the first-person memories of an imagined Nisei who remains in Paris after serving in the 442nd during World War Two. This man has an affair with a woman who, according to the "Intermission" in which Mura takes his own voice in considering his own poem / film, is "a Pigalle whore / who turns out to be a member of the resistance / / very like, no, who is, Marguerite Duras" (rhymes with Mura?). The last two parts of the sequence are imagined in Duras' written and internal voices.

Duras also informs "Lovers and Sons," in which Mura considers the adolescent Duras and her Chinese lover from

her novel/memoir, *The Lover*. He imagines the affair from Duras' perspective: "She strokes his body, the flesh so sumptuously / soft, as of a long convalescence, drained by fever. / And silken, without hair." He imagines it from the Chinese man's perspective: "the girl, the woman, with a slight gesture, / hollows a haunt for herself on my chest." In the last part of the poem, Mura fulfills the Chinese lover's forecast that "my words mingle with hers," when he gathers in himself, Duras, and her lover in just a few lines:

And then, suddenly, in the dark night, the rain came.
The child was sleeping. In a voice that was vacant
and somehow filled with the shiftings of violence,

the Chinese, the Asian, said sadly,
"The monsoon has started." Then the child awoke
and became me, and softly listened to the Chinese

calling for the child to come, see the monsoon.

The multiple identities and voices that Mura imagines prevent an easy, dismissive reading of this book (a reading that I found rather tempting at first). He carries this multiplicity into the third section, which consists of several versions of an affair between a Mura-like Japanese American man and a wealthy blond woman ("His Version," "Her Version," and a "Coda"). Mura introduces "His Version" as a kind of "film"; later, he writes of his lover, whom he "fucked . . . with all the fury / of a slave run amok," echoing the pornographic movie he described watching in "The Colors of Desire." Mura imagines himself slipping in that "missing third" as he exhibits himself in his own "film" and situates the reader in the voyeuristic position he held in "The Colors of Desire."

The racial anger and borderline misogyny of casting himself as the "slave run amok" is present from the beginning of "The Affair—His Version" in spider and web allusions to Whitman's "Noiseless, Patient Spider." Mura's speaker casts the woman as the spider entangling the hapless Japanese American as she ties his wrists to the bed posts with a silk scarf. Although he is at first trapped in the feminization of Whitman's spider, the speaker of "His Version" seems to take on a greater confidence as the relatively short lines of the opening gradually grow to more Whitmanesque length. However, Whitman, that most enthusiastically sexual and American poet, is in constant tension with Prufrock, created by that most reluctantly sexual and American poet. The male speaker recalls that he "sat transfixed," echoing Prufrock's pining, by the "voice" of his lover "standing over the page, shaking her head—'No, no, that's not it at all.'" Mura might be "one of Whitman's most tender boys," as Garrett Hongo writes on a jacket endorsement, but Prufrock is the genius of these poems, with their "thousand visions and revisions" of Japanese American male sexuality—Mura's "overwhelming question."

Just as Prufrock tempers Whitman, the second version of "The Affair," "Her Version," complicates and questions

"His." Mura puts into the woman's voice criticisms of her lover that seem self-reflective questionings of his own stance in the volume; she points out his "wayward self-intoxication," "his absorption in himself," "his doubts and denials," "his cold, implacable fascination with race," his "unimpeachable righteousness / and doubt." When he turns "Her Version" to a second voice, the imagined voice of a real-life model for his imagined lover, he criticizes his own duplicities in having her refer to "all he has written, sentence after sentence of lies."

In the fourth section, Mura moves to a limited acceptance of his own situation. Earlier in the volume, Mura's father receives perhaps more than his share of the blame for Mura's "wayward past," but, in "Gardens We Have Left," Mura sees his father "like a window / I have gazed through all my life," and can recognize what he seemed to have missed earlier: "How / little I have gazed at him in wonder." Mura's "wonder" connects his father with his children: in the final poem of the volume, "Listening," Mura presents himself listening to the child in his wife's womb and "wonder[ing] how anything so tiny could cause such rocking unbroken joy."

Mura's construction and reconstruction of himself as the missing third gives us one of our most complex literary explorations of Asian American male sexuality. When I think of such explorations, I think of the I-got-balls-between-my-legs cowboy pose of Frank Chin and of the castration anxieties of him and his fellow editors of *AIIEEEEE!* Given the historical feminization of Asian American maleness, Mura's willingness to question that pose, to try for the high notes, shows a more "tender" boldness than past male literary treatments of the topic.

Rory Ong (essay date 1997-98)

SOURCE: A review of *Where the Body Meets Memory: An Odyssey of Race, Sexuality, and Identity*, in *Amerasia Journal*. Vol. 23, No. 3, Winter 1997-98, pp. 217-19.

[In the review below, Ong asserts: "If *Where the Body Meets Memory* has a place among the growing works of Asian American autobiographies, it is because Mura ventures into this discursive arena conscious of his hybrid, yet uneven, narrative. He recognizes his lived contradictions, and rather than pretending the contradictions don't exist, he legitimizes them as an integral part of his narrative memory."]

David Mura's most recent autobiographical narrative, *Where the Body Meets Memory*, is a bold and painfully honest critique of Asian American male heterosexuality and its complicity with patriarchal practices of abuse and oppression. This is by no means a simple, neat story. Rather, it involves the difficult task of working through the complex matrices of oppression that many Asian Americans have experienced yet do not, cannot, or refuse to articulate. More than a confessional narrative, Mura links his struggle for racial and sexual identity with his parents' and grandparents'

struggle to find their way in post-internment America. By doing so, he marks the relationship between race, sexuality, and the Asian male body with historical, social, and economic axes of oppression. These intersections provide the framework for Mura to discuss his own history and struggle with abusive relationships, as well as his relationship to patriarchy, cultural hegemony, and a heterosexual male identity and lived practice. We are presented with a much broader understanding of, as Mura himself puts it, "the political and historical and cultural silence induced by the camps, a generational wound and amnesia buried in so many of the bodies and psyches of Japanese America." *Where the Body Meets Memory* complicates simplistic constructions of Asian American identity that reinforce dualistic notions of the oppressor and the oppressed. It obliges us to acknowledge the contradictions inscribed in Asian American male bodies and the competing cultural practices they keep.

Like other self-reflexive autobiographical narratives, such as Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior* and Lydia Minamoto's *Talking to High Monks in the Snow*, Mura's fills in the gaps where there is no clear story. But then that is the importance of self-reflexive autobiography—it generates the story from fragments of memory that were either forgotten or thrown away. Traveling across accounts of his mother's history, his own, and then his father's, Mura helps us to re-imagine and reconstruct several layers of forgotten memory. We are introduced, for example, to his Japanese American parents whose aspirations were to forget the camps and to immerse themselves in mainstream American life. By carefully and thoughtfully interweaving their narratives with his own—such as his mother's consumption of eurocentric culture through her record club in "A Nisei Daughter," and his father's desire to make it into the middle class, to suburban America in "A Nisei Father"—we come to understand Mura's own drive to act and be like everyone else in "All American Boy."

This desire to "act" and to "be" like his white counterparts, Mura explains, had its impact on his sexuality. He points to his sexual awareness as the catalyst for his racial consciousness, aware that his sexual desires were crossing racial lines. Mura recognizes that coming to terms with his sexuality may not have been very different from any other American boys. Nevertheless, his racial difference, the history of Alien Exclusion Laws that kept Japanese from owning property or becoming citizens, and the specter of the internment camps, all were indeed a far cry from the mainstream American experience. This cauldron of contradictions between race, class, patriarchy, and sexuality generated what Mura calls the internment of his desire: the recognition that his very libidinal passions were inextricably linked to the racialization of his body. The most challenging aspect of the autobiography is Mura's claim that his parents' silence about the camps, his family's drive to become model, middle-class citizens, and his unquestioning embrace of hetero-patriarchal culture were all part of the complex socio-historic framework that gave shape to his abusive practices.

In "The Descent," Mura details this abuse—his many affairs, his descent into drugs and pornography—as the expression of his culturally imbricated desires. While difficult to read because of its glaring honesty, Mura painstakingly unpacks the layers and layers of his obsessions with white women. An important aspect of this interrogation is devoted to his relationship with his spouse Susan and the miscegenation it represents. In fact, miscegenation, and the complex and contradictory relations of power that it represents, racially and sexually, becomes something of a defining locus for Mura: that fraught site where the Asian American male heterosexual body confronts patriarchy. Mura's final section "The Internment of Desire," discusses his therapy. The act of talking, writing, and narrating his body helped him to link his abusive practices to patriarchal structures; a process which became crucial to his recovery.

Some may read *Where the Body Meets Memory* as a confessional that seeks excuses, but those who do must also account for Mura's persistent self-reflexive critique—something often missing from the annals of academe. What we will hopefully come to terms with, as Mura has, are the thick layers of oppression that run through our lives and the way we too have become complicit with them. Such critical self-reflexivity is needed in many communities, even among those who continue to be exoticized and fetishized by U.S. culture. Contradictory as this may seem, competing contexts like these make-up the very problematic relationship between body and memory that Mura interrogates. If *Where the Body Meets Memory* has a place among the growing works of Asian American autobiographies, it is because Mura ventures into this discursive arena conscious of his hybrid,

yet uneven, narrative. He recognizes his lived contradictions, and rather than pretending the contradictions don't exist, he legitimizes them as an integral part of his narrative memory. *Where the Body Meets Memory* does what many prose fictions and critical theories have yet to fully express; it challenges us to understand that not only do Asian Americans struggle to resist patriarchy and cultural hegemony, but they also wrestle with the very presence of domination in the texture, fabric, and practice of their everyday lives.

SOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

Riddle, Mason. Review of *Relocations: Images from a Japanese-American*. *High Performance* 14, No. 3 (Fall 1991): 66.

Favorable assessment of Mura's performance piece. "Through poems, monologs, video, slides, and music," Riddle notes, "Mura exposed the contradictions, anger and frustration of growing up in white, middle-class America."

Additional coverage of Mura's life and career is contained in the following sources published by Gale Research: *The Asian American Almanac*; *Contemporary Authors*, Vol. 138; *Who's Who among Asian Americans*.

FAE MYENNE NG

1956-

INTRODUCTION

Ng is the author of the 1993 novel *Bone*, a work focusing on the effects of cultural assimilation on Chinese Americans. Raised in San Francisco's Chinatown, Ng at an early age came into contact with "old timers," immigrants who viewed their residence in America as temporary; after their deaths, their relatives would send their bones back home to China for burial. *Bone*, Ng has stated, was written to honor the memory of that generation. Told by Leila, the eldest of three daughters of the Leong family, the novel provides a provocative account of the humiliation and discrimination many immigrants and second-generation Americans endured. It details the superstitions and prejudices perpetuated by and inflicted upon the Leongs, the conflicts that arise within the confines of Chinatown and their home, and Leila's feelings of guilt, resentment, and alienation. Central to the family's history are the tenuous marriage of Mah and Leon Leong and each daughter's reaction to the assimilation process and immigrant experience: Leila works as a liaison between the Chinese community and San Francisco's English-speaking school system; Nina escapes to Manhattan and travels to the Orient as a tour guide; and Ona remains in Chinatown where she eventually commits suicide. Critics have praised the sparse prose of *Bone*, which, according to Ng, reflects the frugality of the lives of Chinese immigrants.

REVIEWS AND CRITICISM

Abby Tannenbaum (essay date 1993)

SOURCE: "Getting to the Marrow," in *New York Magazine*, Vol. 26, No. 4, 25 January 1993, p. 26.

[In the review below, Tannenbaum considers *Bone* "an impressive addition to the growing list of novels by Asian-American women."]

Thinking about the ten years she devoted to her first novel, *Bone*, Fae Myenne Ng shakes her head. "I never thought I'd finish it," she confesses, nursing a cup of cappuccino in a West Village café. "It took a long, long time for it to fall into place."

Ng, 36, recalls when, as a child in San Francisco, she helped her mother in a sweatshop. "One of my duties was to write the little code number of my mother's sewing machine onto the laundering tabs. I used to sneak out on weekends and go to the department stores and look for the dresses she'd sewn. I never found her dresses, but somehow, finding my book in the bookstore was like that—finally finding something that belonged to me."

An impressive addition to the growing list of novels by Asian-American women, *Bone* is a spare and moving portrait of a family in San Francisco's Chinatown coping with the suicide of the second of three daughters. Like Leila, the book's narrator, Ng is thoroughly rooted in Chinatown traditions. She, too, is the daughter of immigrants with whom she can't fully share her life; Ng's parents, in fact, will have to wait until *Bone* is translated to read it.

"This is a world I know very well, but it's important for me to respect personal lives," Ng offers, addressing the resemblance of *Bone* to her own life. "My test as a fiction writer was to create a whole landscape—a place and people that express everything I learned growing up in that world."

Ng, a passionate reader who names Tillie Olsen, Eudora Welty, and the Chinese poets she memorized as a child among her literary influences, completed her M.F.A. from Columbia in 1984. Supported by grants and various teaching and temporary jobs, she and her husband, Mark Coovell, also a writer, led an itinerant life, which included a trip to China in 1985. A few years ago, they finally settled in their apartment on the edge of Park Slope. "It wasn't easy leaving Chinatown," Ng admits. "But to be home or to be a family is just a feeling. It's something I picked up from the old-timers. They made home wherever they were. Traveling a lot the last few years really gave me a sense of how to live—taking everything with you that you needed."

If writing *Bone* was a struggle, coming up with the title was easy. "The whole ritual of sending the bones back to China was fascinating to me," Ng says, referring to the desire of many early Chinese immigrants to be buried in their homeland. "Bone is what lasts. And I wanted to honor the quality of endurance in the immigrant spirit."

Michiko Kakutani (essay date 1993)

SOURCE: "Building on the Pain of a Past in China," in *The New York Times*, 29 January 1993, p. C26.

[In this review of *Bone*, Kakutani praises Ng's convincing use of memory and her realistic depictions of Chinese immigrant life in America.]

"Remembering the past gives power to the present," says Leila Leong, the narrator of Fae Myenne Ng's incantatory first novel [*Bone*]. "Memories do add up." Our memories,

she continues, can't bring back the dead, "but they count to keep them from becoming strangers."

Moving backward in time like Harold Pinter's *Betrayal* or the Stephen Sondheim musical *Merrily We Roll Along*, *Bone* is a memory-novel, a novel composed of Leila's memories of her family, and her family's memories of their past lives in China and their new lives in the United States. It is a meditation upon the circumstances surrounding the mysterious suicide of Leila's sister Ona and the endless reverberations that that death has had on the entire Leong clan.

As Leila tells us, she is the oldest of the three Leong daughters: Ona was the middle sister; Nina, the youngest. Leila's own father disappeared before her birth, and she regards Leon—her mother's second husband, and the father of Ona and Nina—as her own father.

All of the Leongs blame themselves for Ona's death. Leon thinks he's brought bad luck on the family by failing to honor a promise he made to his adoptive father to return his bones to China. Mah, the mother, worries that her own sins—having an affair with her boss, Tommy Hon—have doomed the family to unhappiness. And Leila berates herself for not having paid more attention to Ona's problems, for not figuring out that something was wrong.

All three sisters, we learn, have had a difficult time straddling their parents' circumscribed world in San Francisco's Chinatown and the bustling, contemporary world beyond. They feel at once suffocated by Mah and Leon's provincialism and guilty about the freedoms and luxuries they take for granted as young American women; at once resentful of their parents' enslavement to the past and wistful about the history that eludes them here in the United States.

"We're lucky, not like the bondmaids growing up in service, or the newborn daughters whose mouths were stuffed with ashes," Leila says.

The beardless, soft-shouldered eunuchs, the courtesans with the three-inch feet and the frightened child brides—they're all stories to us. Nina, Ona and I, we're the lucky generation. Mah and Leon forced themselves to live through the humiliation in this country so that we could have it better. We know so little of the old country. We repeat the names of grandfathers and uncles, but they have always been strangers to us. Family exists only because somebody has a story, and knowing the story connects us to a history.

Each of the Leong daughters has tried to make her own separate peace with her past. Leila has remained at home, working as a counselor at a local school and keeping a watchful eye on her parents. Nina has fled Chinatown altogether: she has moved to New York and taken a job as an airline flight attendant. Ona has found herself stuck midway between the old world and the new: she works as a hostess at Trader Vic's, and dates Osvaldo, the son of her father's

former partner and current nemesis. Under fierce pressure from her parents, she breaks off with Osvaldo, an event that will play a pivotal role in her eventual suicide.

The Romeo and Juliet story of Osvaldo and Ona isn't the only melodrama in the Leong family saga. As Leila unpeels the layers of her family's past, we learn that her parents' lives, too, have been fraught with passion, anger and sadness. Summarily abandoned by her first husband, Mah married Leon, knowing his job as a merchant sailor would keep him traveling a good part of the time: such a marriage, she reasoned, would enable her to calibrate her emotional commitment and protect herself from further hurt. Instead, there were loneliness and days and weeks of waiting, and Mah soon fell into an affair with her employer.

When Leon discovered the affair, he moved out of the house on Salmon Alley and took a shabby room at a nearby boarding house. There, he passes the time dreaming up get-rich-quick schemes and silly new inventions: electric sinks, cookie-tin clocks, cash registers with intercoms.

Though a rapprochement of sorts had been arranged, Leon and Mah have recently been estranged again by the very losses that should have made them partners in grief: their life savings in a failed business venture, and Ona, who leaped off the 13th floor of a nearby housing project.

Having grown up in San Francisco's Chinatown herself, Ms. Ng conjures the immigrant world of Mah and Leon with the affectionate knowledge of an insider and the observant unsentimentality of an outsider. She conveys to the reader the incredible hardship of these characters' lives: the long years spent in sweatshops and kitchens and laundry rooms, the hours and hours spent waiting in lines for Social Security and unemployment compensation. We are made to see, through the eyes of Leila, both the remarkable perseverance of her parents in the face of so much difficulty, and the degree to which that perseverance has been built, in equal parts, on naïveté and genuine courage.

Blessed with a poet's gift for metaphor and a reporter's eye for detail, Ms. Ng writes with grace, authority and grit. The reader eagerly awaits her next book.

Heather Ross Miller (essay date 1993)

SOURCE: "America the Big Lie, the Quintessential," in *The Southern Review*, Vol. 29, No. 2, April 1993, pp. 420-25.

[Here, Miller contends: "Unlike the easy anecdotal musings of Amy Tan, Fae Myenne Ng's haunting book ranges wider and penetrates deeper into the subtexts, dead ends, and labyrinthine interior of the new-American experience, and she holds us all accountable."]

Bone, a novel by Fae Myenne Ng, shows us Chinese immigrants and their first-generation Chinese-American children

in spirited struggles over the best of all possible worlds, American or Old. The bones of ancestors are the bones of life itself, the older generation insists, and those bones carry the memory, the pride, the hope of home. But in America, the bones turn into paper: "In this country, paper is more precious than blood." Lose your paper, you lose your identity, your bones. When graves are relocated to make room for more bones, people in San Francisco's Chinatown must present paper to prove a grandfather was buried there:

Mah wrote everything down. . . . [T]wenty years ago she'd . . . slipped that sheet into a glass jar to be buried in Grandpa Leong's coffin. "Insurance," the sewing ladies had advised. "In case of earthquake or war, people would know where the body belonged, where home was."

Unlike the easy anecdotal musings of Amy Tan, Fae Myenne Ng's haunting book ranges wider and penetrates deeper into the subtexts, dead ends, and labyrinthine interior of the new-American experience, and she holds us all accountable. More than the American family is on trial here. The whole concept of American life appears boiled down to its pure character, something like a fifth essence or best part, a thing we might call quintessential. To be American, our national dream insists, is to live redeemed, freed from a burdensome past. But somebody has to pay the price of redemption and personal freedom. Those freed are also, ultimately, the cut-off ones who will be victimized by impossible visions.

Leila, first daughter of Mah, "from before Leon," tells the story. "Ona came next and then Nina. First, Middle, and End Girl. Our order of birth marked us and came to tell more than our given names." Leila rambles through the past seeking answers to Ona's recent suicide, to Nina's alienation, and to the fierce guilt and pride driving their family apart. Written in a smooth and strong voice, her ramblings have purpose. These are young Chinese-American women, born in California, equally proud of and confused by their ancient heritage and their rapidly expanding future:

We're lucky, not like the bondmaids growing up in service, or the newborn daughters whose mouths were stuffed with ashes . . . the courtesans with three-inch feet and the frightened child brides. . . . Nina, Ona, and I, we're the lucky generation. Mah and Leon forced themselves to live through the humiliation in this country so we could have it better. We know so little of the old country. . . . Family exists only because somebody has a story, and knowing the story connects us to a history. To us, the deformed man is oddly compelling, the forgotten man is a good story, and a beautiful woman suffers.

Leila, abandoned by her biological father before birth, loves and reveres Leon, the merchant seaman, the fry-cook, the welder, her mother's second husband, father of Ona and Nina. She understands what he, ironically the "father" of her American life, does not—that he has no redeemable self in this system. He is lost. It is Leila who guides him and

MAJOR WORK

Bone (novel) 1993

Mah through American red tape, through Social Security, through health insurance, through taxes, and through Ona's suicide. It is Leila who witnesses Leon's anger with the Social Security interviews and discovers his despair afterward in all the many papers of hard rejection:

The past came up: moldy, water-damaged, paper smell and a parchment texture. The letters were stacked by year and rubberbanded into decades. I had only to open the first few to know the story: "We Don't Want You."

A rejection from the Army: unfit.

A job rejection: unskilled.

An apartment: unavailable.

. . . Leon kept things because he believed time mattered. Old made good. These letters gained value the way old coins did; they counted the way money counted. All the letters addressed to Leon should prove to the people at the social security office that this country was his place, too. Leon had paid; Leon had earned his rights. American dollars. American time. These letters marked his time and they marked his endurance. Leon was a paper son.

Leila finds Leon's citizenship affidavit, as well as a copy of her father's and Mah's wedding certificate. And she knows, after her first surprise and anger, that Leon was right to save all the American paper: "I'm the stepdaughter of a paper son. . . . All I have is those memories, and I want to remember them all."

After Ona leaps to her death from a rooftop, Leon runs berserk through Chinatown, blaming everybody, everything, to assuage his own desperate guilt:

Finally he blamed all of America for making big promises and breaking every one. . . . Where was the good job he'd heard about as a young man? Where was the successful business? . . . [W]here was his happiness? "America," he ranted, "this lie of a country!"

In the end, Leila learns the same sorts of lessons as Dexter Mitchell and makes her peace, marrying Mason, a Chinatown mechanic who works exclusively on foreign cars, and who has stood by her through all the family tragedies, and who helps her bring Mah and Leon toward an uneasy, if genuine and loving, acceptance of the little life seems to be.

And we are reminded of Tolstoy's observation that happy families are all alike. Ms. Ng drives home the point of that famous dictum, that the capacity of unhappy families to intrigue and teach us is stunning.

Diane Yen-Mei Wong (essay date 1993)

SOURCE: "Survival," in *Belles Lettres*, Vol. 8, No. 3, Spring 1993, p. 21.

[In the review below of *Bone*, Wong censures the novel's lack of plot and its reverse chronology, but concedes that Ng uses "her nonstop staccato brush to paint a vivid picture of the real Chinatown, a stark ghetto that exists behind tourist facades and above the import/export shops lining crowded streets—a community struggling to survive economically and culturally."]

Readers who choose to spend the night with Fae Myenne Ng's *Bone* must accept the all-too-clear conclusion of the plot, which Ng presents in one paragraph at the beginning of the first chapter: "Mah and Leon are still married, but after Ona jumped off the Nam, Leon moved out. It was a bad time. Too much happened on Salmon Alley. We don't talk about it. Even the sewing ladies leave it alone."

There it is: the entire plot. Don't expect surprises, because the novel's strength is not the plot. And the reverse chronological order of the book can sometimes be annoying: Ng litters her pages with portents of suicide and death.

Having written that revealing paragraph, though, Ng can then use her nonstop staccato brush to paint a vivid picture of the real Chinatown, a stark ghetto that exists behind tourist facades and above the import/export shops lining crowded streets—a community struggling to survive economically and culturally.

Ng develops multidimensional Chinese Americans and presents them through the eyes of an insider, Leila, through whom we discover complexity and humanity. As the oldest daughter and the child to whom her parents turn for help in interacting with the white world, Leila must look for proof of her stepfather's age to help qualify him for Social Security. She searches through his old suitcase and finds a treasure chest containing photos and other mementos that make up his life:

A scarf with a colored map of Italy. Spanish pesetas in an envelope. Old Chinese money. Dinner menus from the American President Lines. The Far East itinerary for Matson Lines. A well-used bilingual cookbook. . . . Selections from newspapers.

Leila's mother, a garment worker, has spent all her life at a job that pays little and demands much in an industry that absorbs the life force of many immigrants. Ng's description disturbs and moves:

She said she was ready to quit the sewing shops. I was glad to hear it. I'd watched the years of working in the sweatshops change her body. Her neck softened. Her shoulders grew heavy. Work was her whole life, and every forward stitch marked time passing. She wanted to get out before her whole life passed under the stamping needles.

With the plot's outline already clearly defined, Ng takes time to play with words. From the beginning, the rhythm of each phrase cannot be ignored. The quick beat and minimal phrasing used to describe Leila's time with lover Mason reflect the pace of their interaction, which is constantly interrupted by her parents' unending demands: "We dozed and woke up starved. It was dark by the time we finished our burritos at the taqueria down the block. We stopped at the corner bodega for some groceries: juice and milk and bread for morning, chips and beer for that night."

As the story progresses, the reader discovers that Ng's love of language does not stop with rhythm: it extends to alliteration ("I signed where the policeman pointed. Pen. Paper. Press down.") and onomatopoeia ("I love the tuck-perfect fit of the drawers, and the *tock!* sound the brass handles make against the hard wood"). Playful language does not, however, mask the book's serious nature.

Bone is a book about survival and the price it exacts on immigrants and their children: Leila survives by remaining attached to her family; the youngest survives by cutting ties; the middle child despairs because she cannot find a path that allows her to be herself and her parents' child.

Leon, the stepfather, once told Leila that there was a Chinese tradition of honoring paper and treating all writing as sacred. Ng's writing may not be sacred, but it is worthy of respect.

Suzanne Samuel (essay date 1993)

SOURCE: "Time Heals No Wounds," in *The Women's Review of Books*, Vol. X, No. 8, May 1993, pp. 27-8.

[In the following, Samuel regards Ng as a "master storyteller."]

Fae Myenne Ng's masterful debut novel centers on three Chinese American sisters. All are raised by the same mother and father, Mah and Leon, but each responds differently to family dynamics and the conflict between their San Francisco Chinatown community and American culture. Each evolves into an individual woman with a separate destiny.

Leila, the oldest daughter and the book's narrator, is bound most strongly to Chinatown, though she drives a Karmann-Ghia and favors burritos and Vietnamese takeout. Nina, the youngest, escapes—first through adolescent independence and later by leaving Chinatown altogether and moving 3,000