

Donald Duk

A NOVEL BY FRANK CHIN

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Summary: On the eve of the Chinese New Year in San Francisco's Chinatown, twelve-year-old Donald Duk attempts to deal with his comical name and his feelings for his cultural heritage.

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This book was set in Adobe Garamond type and smyth sewn for readability and durability.

for John Fisher

The night we ran, boy,

Nobody's faster

Sleeper's inside never woke

We were afraid of guns

1

WHO WOULD BELIEVE anyone named Donald Duk dances like Fred Astaire? Donald Duk does not like his name. Donald Duk never liked his name. He hates his name. He is not a duck. He is not a cartoon character. He does not go home to sleep in Disneyland every night. The kids that laugh at him are very smart. Everyone at his private school is smart. Donald Duk is smart. He is a gifted one, they say.

No one in school knows he takes tap dance lessons from a man who calls himself “The Chinese Fred Astaire.” Mom talks Dad into paying for the lessons and tap shoes.

Fred Astaire. Everybody everywhere likes Fred Astaire in the old black-and-white movies. Late at night on tv, even Dad smiles when Fred Astaire dances. Mom hums along. Donald Duk wants to live the late-night life in old black-and-white movies and talk with his feet like Fred Astaire, and smile Fred Astaire’s sweet lemonade smile.

The music teacher and English teacher in school go dreamy-eyed when they talk about seeing Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers on the late-night tv. “Remember when he danced with Barbara Stanwyck? What was the name of that movie. . . ?”

"Barbara Stanwyck?"

"Did you see the one where he dances with Rita Hayworth?"

"Oooh, Rita Hayworth!"

Donald Duk enjoys the books he reads in school. The math is a curious game. He is not the only Chinese in the private school. But he is the only Donald Duk. He avoids the other Chinese here. And the Chinese seem to avoid him. This school is a place where the Chinese are comfortable hating Chinese. "Only the Chinese are stupid enough to give a kid a stupid name like Donald Duk," Donald Duk says to himself. "And if the Chinese were that smart, why didn't they invent tap dancing?"

Donald Duk's father's name is King. King Duk. Donald hates his father's name. He hates being introduced with his father. "This is King Duk, and his son Donald Duk." Mom's name is Daisy. "That's Daisy Duk, and her son Donald." Venus Duk and Penny Duk are Donald's sisters. The girls are twins and a couple of years older than Donald.

His own name is driving him crazy! Looking Chinese is driving him crazy! All his teachers are making a big deal about Chinese stuff in their classes because of Chinese New Year coming on soon. The teacher of California History is so happy to be reading about the Chinese. "The man I studied history under at Berkeley authored this book. He was a spellbinding lecturer," the teacher throbs. Then he reads, "The Chinese in America were made passive and nonassertive by centuries of Confucian thought and Zen mysticism. They were totally unprepared for the violently individualistic and democratic Americans. From their first step on American soil to the middle of the twentieth century, the timid, introverted Chinese have been helpless against the relentless victimization by aggressive, highly competitive Americans."

"One of the Confucian concepts that lends the Chinese vulnerable to the assertive ways of the West is *the mandate of heaven*. As the European kings of old ruled by divine right, so the emperors of China ruled by the mandate of heaven." The teacher takes a

breath and looks over his spellbound class. Donald wants to barf pink and green stuff all over the teacher's teacher's book.

"What's he saying?" Donald Duk's pal Arnold Azalea asks in a whisper.

"Same thing as everybody—Chinese are artsy, cutesy and chickendick," Donald whispers back.

Oh, no! Here comes Chinese New Year again! It is Donald Duk's worst time of year. Here come the stupid questions about the funny things Chinese believe in. The funny things Chinese do. The funny things Chinese eat. And, "Where can I buy some Chinese firecrackers?"

And in Chinatown it's *Goòng háy fot choy* everywhere. And some gang kids do sell firecrackers. And some gang kids rob other kids looking for firecrackers. He doesn't like the gang kids. He doesn't like speaking their Chinese. He doesn't have to—this is America. He doesn't like Chinatown. But he lives here.

The gang kids know him. They call him by name. One day the Frog Twins wobble onto the scene with their load of full shopping bags. There is Donald Duk. And there are five gang boys and two girlfriends chewing gum, swearing and smirking. The gang kids wear black tanker jackets, white tee shirts and baggy black denim jeans. It is the alley in front of the Chinese Historical Society Museum. There are fish markets on each side of the Chinatown end of the alley. Lawrence Ferlinghetti's famous City Lights Bookstore is at the end that opens on Columbus Street. Suddenly there are the Frog Twins in their heavy black overcoats. They seem to be wearing all the clothes they own under their coats. Their coats bulge. Under their skirts they wear several pairs of trousers and slacks. They wear one knit cap over the other. They wear scarves tied over their heads and shawls over their shoulders.

That night, after he is asleep, Dad comes home from the restaurant and wakes him up. "You walk like a sad softie," Dad says. "You look like you want everyone to beat you up."

"I do not!" Donald Duk says.

"You look at yourself in the mirror," Dad says, and Donald Duk looks at himself in his full-length dressing mirror. "Look at those slouching shoulders, that pouty face. Look at those hands holding onto each other. You look scared!" Dad's voice booms and Donald hears everyone's feet hit the floor. Mom and the twins are out in the hall looking into his open door.

"I am scared!" Donald Duk says.

"I don't care if you are scared," Dad says. His eyes sizzle into Donald Duk's frightened pie-eyed stare. "Be as scared as you want to be, but don't look scared. Especially when you walk through Chinatown."

"How do I look like I'm not scared if I *am* scared?" Donald Duk asks.

"You walk with your back straight. You keep your hands out of your pockets. Don't hunch your shoulders. Think of them as being down. Keep your head up. Look like you know where you're going. Walk like you know where you're going. And you say, 'Don't mess with me, horsepuckie! Don't mess with me!' But you don't say it with your mouth. You say it with your eyes. You say it with your hands where everybody can see them. Anybody get two steps in front of you, you zap them with your eyes, and they had better nod at you or look away. When they nod, you nod. When you walk like nobody better mess with you, nobody will mess with you. When you walk around like you're walking now, all rolled up in a little ball and hiding out from everything, they'll get you for sure."

Donald does not like his dad waking him up like that and yelling at him. But what the old man says works. Outside among the cold San Francisco shadows and the early morning shoppers, Donald Duk hears his father's voice and straightens his back, takes his hands out of his pockets, says "Don't mess with me!" with his eyes and every move of his body. And, yes, he's talking with his body the way Fred Astaire talks, and shoots every gang kid who walks toward him in the eye with a look that says, "Don't mess

with me." And no one messes with him. Dad never talks about it again.

Later, gang kids laugh at his name and try to pick fights with him during the afternoon rush hour, Dad's busy time in the kitchen. Donald is smarter than these lowbrow beady-eyed goons. He has to beat them without fighting them because he doesn't know how to fight. Donald Duk gets the twins to talk about it with Dad while they are all at the dining room table working on their model airplanes.

Dad laughs. "So he has a choice. He does not like people laughing at his name. He does not want the gangsters laughing at his name to beat him up. He mostly does not want to look like a sissy in front of them, so what can he do?"

"He can pay them to leave him alone," Venus says.

"He can not! That is so chicken it's disgusting!" Penelope says.

"So, our little brother is doomed."

"He can agree with them and laugh at his name," Dad says. "He can tell them lots of Donald Duk jokes. Maybe he can learn to talk that quack-quack Donald Duck talk."

"Whaaat?" the twins ask in one voice.

"If he keeps them laughing," Dad says, "even if he can just keep them listening, they are not beating him up, right? And they are not calling him a sissy. He does not want to fight? He does not have to fight. He has to use his smarts, okay? If he's smart enough, he makes up some Donald Duck jokes to surprise them and make them laugh. They laugh three times, he can walk away. Leave them there laughing, thinking Donald Duk is one terrific fella."

"So says King Duk," Venus Duk flips. The twins often talk as if everything they hear everybody say and see everybody do is dialog in a memoir they're writing or action in a play they're directing. This makes Mom feel like she's on stage and drives Donald Duk crazy.

"Is that Chinese psychology, dear?" Daisy Duk asks.

"Daisy Duk inquires," says Penelope Duk.

"And little Donnie Duk says, *Oh, Mom!* and sighs."

"I do not!" Donald Duk yelps at the twins.

"Well, then, say it," Penelope Duk says. "It's a good line. So *you* you, you know."

"Thank you," Venus says.

"Oh goshes, you all, your sympathy is so . . . so . . . so literary. So dramatic," Donald Duk says. "It is truly depressing."

"I thought it was narrative," Venus says.

"Listen up for some Chinese psychology, girls and boys," Daisy Duk says.

"No, that's not psychology, that's Bugs Bunny," Dad says.

"You don't mean Bugs Bunny, dear. You always make that mistake."

"Br'er Rabbit!" Dad says.

"What does that mean?" Donald Duk asks the twins. They shrug their shoulders. Nobody knows what Br'er Rabbit has to do with Dad's way of avoiding a fight and not being a fool, but it works.

One bright and sunny afternoon, a gang boy stops Donald and talks to him in the quacking voice of Walt Disney's Donald Duck. The voice breaks Donald Duk's mind for a flash, and he is afraid to turn on his own Donald Duck voice. He tries telling a joke about Donald Duck not wearing trousers or shoes, when the gangster—in black jeans, black tee shirt, black jacket, black shades—says in a perfect Donald Duck voice, "Let's take the pants off Donald Duk!"

"Oh oh! I stepped in it now!" Donald Duk says in his Donald Duck voice and stuns the gangster and his two gangster friends and their three girlfriends. Everything is seen and understood very fast. Without missing a beat, his own perfect Donald Duck voice cries for help in perfect Cantonese *Gow meng ahhhh!* and they all laugh. Old women pulling little wire shopping carts full of fresh vegetables stop and stare at him. Passing children recognize the voice and say Donald Duck talks Chinese.

"Don't let these monsters take off my pants. I may be Donald Duk, but I am as human as you," he says in Chinese, in his Donald Duck voice, "I know how to use chopsticks. I use flush toilets. Why shouldn't I wear pants on Grant Street in Chinatown?" They all laugh more than three times. Their laughter roars three times on the corner of Grant and Jackson, and Donald Duk walks away, leaving them laughing, just the way Dad says he can. He feels great. Just great!

Donald Duk does not want to laugh about his name forever. There has to be an end to this. There is an end to all kidstuff for a kid. An end to diapers. An end to nursery rhymes and fairy tales. There has to be an end to laughing about his name to get out of a fight. Chinese New Year. Everyone will be laughing. He is twelve years old. Twelve years old is special to the Chinese. There are twelve years in the Asian lunar zodiac. For each year there is an animal. This year Donald will complete his first twelve-year cycle of his life. To celebrate, Donald Duk's father's old opera mentor, Uncle Donald Duk, is coming to San Francisco to perform a Cantonese opera. Donald Duk does not want Chinese New Year. He does not want his Uncle Donald Duk to tell him again how Daddy was a terrible man to name his little boy Donald Duk, because all the *bokgwai*, the white monsters, will think he is named after that barebutt cartoon duck in the top half of a sailor suit and no shoes.

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EVERYONE IN SCHOOL knows that Donald Duk's uncle, Donald Duk, the Cantonese opera entrepreneur and star, is coming to the school. The whole school is set to assemble in the auditorium, where Uncle Donald will appear in Cantonese opera costume and makeup and do a bit of opera that will make no kind of sense to the school and embarrass Donald Duk. No, Donald does not want his uncle to come. It will be awful. Everything Chinese in his life seems to be awful. His father is awful.

Daddy has an awful Chinatown accent. Daddy is not rich. He is not poor, either. He owns a successful Chinatown restaurant. He is the best cook there. In Chinatown they say he is one of the best seven.

It is a Chinese kitchen in a Chinese restaurant. All deep iron woks, gas griddles and grills in a line against one wall. Dad never complains or stops smiling when Donald Duk asks for what he thinks is pure American food. Steaks. Chops. One night Arnold Azalea stays for dinner in the kitchen. Donald Duk asks Dad for a French fish stew he's read about in the newspaper. He asks for bouillabaisse. And his father makes bouillabaisse. He chops the

onions with his Chinese cleaver. He talks about the difference between pure French cooking and the French-with-the-Chinese-twist cooking he does. Dad says he can make Spanish paella or Italian cioppino too, or anything Donald wants to eat. During the last war, Dad says, he is on the security staff of the U.S. Army chief of staff, a four-star general who travels the world and answers only to the commander in chief.

"I learned to cook in the kitchens of the most powerful men in the world, keeping my eye on the chefs," Dad says often. A hamburger, an omelet, a chicken-fried steak starts Dad telling the story of how he passed the war in the kitchens of presidents, prime ministers, premiers, lords and generalissimos. "But you know, the best kitchen in the world was Chiang Kai-shek's. His chefs were all Cantonese.

"And they could cook everything—Italian, Greek, French, Spanish, Brazilian—they did it all. I asked them, Why? And they said, Chiang never entertains other Chinese, only Europeans, who can stand to eat only one Chinese banquet a month. And Chiang wants all his foreign visitors to feel at home, in their noses, palates and taste buds. That's what they tell me. And I learn a lot from them. I learn from all of them."

Donald Duk's best friend, Arnold Azalea, and his mother and father eat in Donald Duk's father's Chinatown restaurant now and then. Sometimes they bring friends. The adults do not mind being left alone at the table and are happy to let Arnold join Donald in the kitchen. The boys sit on Chinese stools at two places set on the kitchen chopping block and challenge the extent of Dad's knowledge of food and cooking. Whatever the boys read about and ask for, Dad cooks without a book. Whatever it is, he cooks it. It's become a game that sends the boys to the library reading books about food.

One night out with his parents and their friends, Arnold Azalea asks if he can spend the night at Donald Duk's, in Chinatown. Donald Duk does not ask Arnold to stay over. He never thought

of asking anyone over to his house. His house is too Chinese. Arnold's father excuses himself from the table and goes back into the kitchen to talk with Donald's dad.

"King," Arnold's dad says, "my boy has just invited himself to spend the night at your house with Donald."

Donald's dad looks over his shoulder between the stainless steel shelves of the steam table to see Arnold's dad. He grins and speaks with both of his hands busy flashing and clanging a long-handled spoon and spatula against the sides of a round-bottomed wok. He scoops and spoons diced chicken in a light sauce out of the wok onto a serving dish, in three moves. "Sure! We're happy to have him over. He can stay in Donald's room."

"And we'd be happy to have Donald spend a night or a weekend with Arnold. The boys are such close friends."

"Sure. No problem," Donald Duk's father says.

There are two old Chinatown sisters. Twins. Scrunched-up old Chinatown women who have exactly the same eyes. Frog eyes. Their eyes seem to bulge out of their heads. They wait outside Dad's restaurant when the garbage is put out. Now and then, when Dad knows they are out in the alley, he gives them a fresh catfish to take home. Or a piece of Chinese sidemeat people like to steam in a pot with taro root and potato. Dad is nice to them because they are twins, like Donald Duk's older sisters. Donald Duk calls the old twins "the Frog Twins." He thinks they look like frogs. He says they look like they eat flies.

On his time off from the restaurant, Dad builds model airplanes. He calls them "stick and paper" models of airplanes that flew in World War I and World War II. The next day Arnold cannot take his eyes off of all the large model airplanes hanging from the ceilings of the living room and dining room. Dad tells him he is building 108 little airplanes. "One for each of the 108 outlaw heroes of a famous Chinese book I read when I was a kid."

"What are you going to do with them?"

"I'm going to fly them all off of Angel Island on the fifteenth day of the Chinese New Year," Dad says.

"I wish I could see that," Arnold says. Donald cannot believe it. Arnold likes Chinese food. He asks about the stories in the book about the 108 outlaw heroes. And, oh no! before Donald knows it, Arnold is sleeping over the whole two weeks before the parade, and Dad enrolls them both in his friend's White Crane Kung Fu Club, so Donald and Arnold can both run inside the long dragon lantern during the Chinese New Year parade.

"Then after the parade we'll go to Angel Island and fly the model airplanes," Arnold says. He sounds like he can't wait. He sounds like he wants to run inside the stupid dragon, wants to fly the stupid model airplanes Dad and the twins built.

"No, after the opera," says Dad.

"The opera?"

"Cantonese opera. My old opera *sifu*, the original Donald Duk, is bringing his company to town to perform a special Cantonese opera for the New Year, the same night of the parade. Big night. The night of lights and lovers. After the opera, you and your folks, we will all go with the opera people for a little banquet. You boys will be staying up very late. Yes, well past midnight into the early morning before the sun rises. Then we will board my chartered boat and cross the water to Angel Island. I'm going to set them all afire and launch them. And all the planes will fly. And all the planes will burn."

Donald is as shocked as his friend Arnold. Dad never said he planned to burn all the little airplanes. Dad and the twins worked years to build these planes. Now Dad says he wants to burn them all up the first time they fly? "Why?" Donald asks.

"The mandate of heaven. *Tien ming*."

"What's that?" Donald asks and remembers Mr. Meanwright's saying the Chinese mandate of heaven is why Chinese are cutesy chickendicks.

"The Chinese say, Kingdoms rise and fall. Nations come and go," Dad says.

"What does that mean?"

"Nothing is good forever. What goes up will come down. Times change. Do not get hang up on your own bullsquish. Do not fall in love with your good looks. Don't marry your stool pigeon."

"What's that mean?" Donald asks.

"You and your pal Arnold are going to learn what that means before the night of the parade, or you're not running inside the dragon."

"I don't want to run inside the dragon. Arnold wants to run inside the dragon, not me!" Donald Duk says.

"You're his host. He is your guest. He runs, you run. If I do your friend a favor, I am doing you a favor. Understand that right now or I'll stop doing you favors and Arnold can go home."

Donald cools it.

"What does *stool pigeon* mean, Mr. Duk?" Arnold asks.

"It means fink, tattletale, stool pigeon kind of people."

Donald Duk thinks he understands why Arnold is being so geewhiz gah-gah mouth about Dad's toy planes. Donald hates to see his friend pretend to be so nice to Chinese with stupid names like Duk. Donald Duk has as little to do with any of them as he can. Donald does not care what King, Daisy, Penny or Venus Duk do. If they want to build little airplanes on the dining room table night and day, Donald does not care. But he is a little surprised to hear Dad is going to burn them all.

Day after day, night after night, he passes the dining and front rooms on the way into and out of the apartment. He glances in at them going to or from the front room, where he watches tv. All the planes. All covered with colored tissue paper and painted with Chinese watercolors. Each plane has a little motor. Dad does not paint the models to look like the real planes of World War I and World War II. Instead, Dad paints faces on the noses, hands on the wings, and spears and bows and arrows and old-time Chinese weapons in the hands. And still the planes look kind of real, ready to fly.

If they are all going to burn anyway, why can't Donald Duk fly

one and burn it himself? Donald Duk wonders about that every night before he falls asleep. Every time he walks past the rooms and looks over the planes, he is looking for the one plane Dad will not get all mad over when Donald burns it by himself.

He chooses a little stubby one. It is a P-26A. It looks like a little honeybee. The plane's wings are the same shape as a bee's wings. It also looks like a little sports car. A hand holding a short-handled battle-axe is painted on each wingtip. Donald goes to the library and looks up the P-26A, and reads about it, and finds pictures of it. The real P-26A was a warplane that never flew in a war, except in China, where it was shot out of the sky before Pearl Harbor. It was called the "Peashooter." The most famous of these planes had blue bodies and yellow wings. The rudder and horizontal stabilizer at the tail were yellow.

The colors of Dad's model P-26A are nothing like the real thing.

One night Donald Duk puts on his new sneakers in the dark and does not turn on the light. Arnold is asleep in the upper bunk. He is staying over every night of the Chinese New Year celebration . . . Tomorrow is the first day. He opens the door to his room and there is the dark of the empty hallway. He steps into the hall and looks through the dark to the front of the apartment. He is dressed in clean clothes. He even has a jacket on to keep out the cold he knows is upstairs on the roof.