

MAXINE HONG KINGSTON

Author of THE WOMAN WARRIOR and CHINA MEN

# *Tripmaster*

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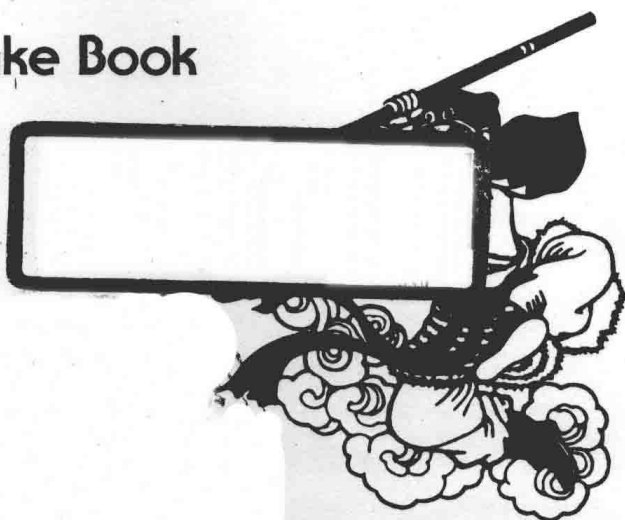
his  
fake  
book



"A dazzling leap of imaginative sympathy [and] narrative magic." — *The New York Times Book Review*

# TRIPMASTER MONKEY

His Fake Book



Maxine  
Hong  
Kingston

VINTAGE INTERNATIONAL

VINTAGE BOOKS

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INTERNATIONAL

ALSO BY MAXINE HONG KINGSTON

*The Woman Warrior* (1976)

*China Men* (1980)

*Hawai'i One Summer* (1987)

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*This fiction is set in the 1960s, a time when some events  
appeared to occur months or even years anachronistically.*

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standing on the cinderbarons' street. They take the side of the bridge that faces land. And the City. The last way. Feet first. Coat Tower giving you the finger all the way down. Wittenon would face the sea. And the setting sun. Dive. But he was not going to do that. Strange. These gun pictures were what was left of his childhood ability to see galaxies. Giant cosmospheeres there had once been, and planets with creatures, such danger, such colors. None abiding. In the Chambers, a husband and wife, past eighty, too old to live, had shot each other with a weak gun, and had had to go to a doctor to have the bullets prised out of their ears. And a Buddhist had set fire to himself and burned to death on purpose; his name was Quing Duo, Quing Duo. Remember. In the cremations along the Ganges, the moonmerry day with the burning body until its head pops. Pop.

Today Wittenon was taking a walk on a path that will lead into the underpass beneath the grand river. In fact, the park didn't look half bad in the fog, beginning to fall, denuding the bullocks that domed like green-grey moons rising or setting. He pulled the collar of his pea coat higher and dropped on his cigarette. He had walked this far into the park hardly seeing it. He ought to let it come in, he decided. He would let it all come in. An old white woman was sitting on a bench selling tracts "for 1/2 dollar ea." which a darky and a whitey picked out with gloved fingers. She lifted her head and turned her face toward Wittenon's; her hands were working one more tract out of paper and cardboard. Not eyelids, exactly, but like skin flaps or membranes toward her eye sockets and quivered from the empty air in the holes or with efforts to see. Sockets wide open. He looked at her thick feet chapped and cleft in spots. Their sorry feet is how you can tell crazy people what they've no place to go and walk everywhere.

Wittenon buried his head, and there on the ground were a pigeon and a squawking gull, both puking. He looked away so that he would not himself get nauseated. Pigeons have milk sacs in their throats. Maybe this one was disgorging milk because last night a wind had blown in from the ocean and blown its squabs out of their nest, and it was nursing itself. Or does that happen in the spring? But in Oulacania in the fall as well? The man was only a running drink. This walk was turning out to be a blame Lounsbury's long walk. There was no helping that. There is no helping what you live when you let it all come in; he hadn't been at on building any city. It was already cold, soon the downside of the year. He walked into the tunnel.

Coming toward him from the other end came a Chinese dude from Chinatown, stout, stooped-backed, low-legged, brown-skinned, old on a stool-

## TRIPPERS AND ASKERS



MAYBE IT COMES from living in San Francisco, city of clammy humors and foghorns that warn and warn—omen, o-o-men, o dolorous omen, o dolors of omens—and not enough sun, but Wittman Ah Sing considered suicide every day. Entertained it. There slid beside his right eye a black gun. He looked side-eyed for it. Here it comes. He actually crooked his trigger finger and—bang!—his head breaks into pieces that fly far apart in the scattered universe. Then blood, meat, disgusting brains, mind guts, but he would be dead already and not see the garbage. The mouth part of his head would remain attached. He groaned. Hemingway had done it in the mouth. Wittman was not el pachuco loco. Proof: he could tell a figment from a table. Or a tree. Being outdoors, in Golden Gate Park, he stepped over to a tree and knock-knocked on it, struck a match on it. Lit a cigarette. Whose mind is it that doesn't suffer a loud takeover once in a while? He was aware of the run of his mind, that's all. He was not making plans to do himself in, and no more willed these seppuku movies—no more conjured up that gun—than built this city. His cowboy boots, old brown Wellingtons, hit its pavements hard. Anybody serious about killing himself does the big leap off the Golden Gate. The wind or shock knocks you out before impact. Oh, long before impact. So far, two hundred and thirty-five people, while taking a walk alone on the bridge—a mere net between you and the grabby ocean—had heard a voice out of the windy sky—Laurence Olivier asking them something: "To be or not to be?" And they'd answered, "Not to be," and climbed on top of the railing, fingers and toes

roosting on the cinnabarine steel. They take the side of the bridge that faces land. And the City. The last city. Feet first. Coit Tower giving you the finger all the way down. Wittman would face the sea. And the setting sun. Dive. But he was not going to do that. Strange. These gun pictures were what was left of his childhood ability to see galaxies. Glass cosmospheres there had once been, and planets with creatures, such doings, such colors. None abiding. In the *Chronicle*, a husband and wife, past eighty, too old to live, had shot each other with a weak gun, and had had to go to a doctor to have the bullets prized out of their ears. And a Buddhist had set fire to himself and burned to death on purpose; his name was Quang Duc. Quang Duc. Remember. In the cremations along the Ganges, the mourners stay with the burning body until its head pops. Pop.

Today Wittman was taking a walk on a path that will lead into the underpass beneath the gnarly trees. In fact, the park didn't look half bad in the fog beginning to fall, dimming the hillocks that domed like green-grey moons rising or setting. He pulled the collar of his pea coat higher and dragged on his cigarette. He had walked this far into the park hardly seeing it. He ought to let it come in, he decided. He would let it all come in. An old white woman was sitting on a bench selling trivets "@  $\frac{1}{2}$  dollar ea.," which a ducky and a bunny pointed out with gloved fingers. She lifted her head and turned her face toward Wittman's; her hands were working one more trivet out of yarn and bottlecaps. Not eyelids exactly but like skin flaps or membranes covered her eye sockets and quivered from the empty air in the holes or with efforts to see. Sockets wide open. He looked at her thick feet chapped and dirty in zoris. Their sorry feet is how you can tell crazy people who have no place to go and walk everywhere.

Wittman turned his head, and there on the ground were a pigeon and a squatting man, both puking. He looked away so that he would not himself get nauseated. Pigeons have milk sacs in their throats. Maybe this one was disgorging milk because last night a wind had blown in from the ocean and blown its squabs out of their nest, and it was milking itself. Or does that happen in the spring? But in California in the fall as well? The man was only a vomiting drunk. This walk was turning out to be a Maïte Laurids Brigge walk. There was no helping that. There is no helping what you see when you let it all come in; he hadn't been in on building any city. It was already cold, soon the downside of the year. He walked into the tunnel.

Heading toward him from the other end came a Chinese dude from China, hands clasped behind, bow-legged, loose-seated, out on a stroll—

that walk they do in kung fu movies when they are full of contentment on a sunny day. As luck would have it, although there was plenty of room, this dude and Wittman tried to pass each other both on the same side, then both on the other, sidestepping like a couple of basketball stars. Wittman stopped dead in his tracks, and shot the dude a direct stink-eye. The F.O.B. stepped aside. Following, straggling, came the poor guy's wife. She was coaxing their kid with sunflower seeds, which she cracked with her gold tooth and held out to him. "Ho sick, la. Ho sick," she said. "Good eating. Good eats." Her voice sang, rang, banged in the echo-chamber tunnel. Mom and shamble-legged kid were each stuffed inside of about ten homemade sweaters. Their arms stuck out fatly. The mom had on a nylon or rayon pantsuit. ("Ny-lon ge. Mm lon doc." "Nylon-made. Lasts forever.") "No!" said the kid. Echoes of "No!" Next there came scrabbling an old lady with a cane. She also wore one of those do-it-yourself pantsuit outfits. On Granny's head was a cap with a pompon that matched everybody's sweaters. The whole family taking a cheap outing on their day off. Immigrants. Fresh Off the Boats out in public. Didn't know how to walk together. Spitting seeds. So uncool. You wouldn't mislike them on sight if their pants weren't so highwater, gym socks white and noticeable. F.O.B. fashions—highwaters or puddlecuffs. Can't get it right. Uncool. Uncool. The tunnel smelled of mothballs—F.O.B. perfume.

On the tunnel ceiling, some tall paint-head had sprayed, "I love my skull." And somebody else had answered, "But oh you kidney!" This straighter person had prime-coated in bone-white a precise oval on the slope of the wall, and lettered in neat black, "But oh you kidney!"

He would avoid the Academy of Sciences, especially the North American Hall. Coyotes and bobcats dead behind glass forever. Stuffed birds stuffed inside their pried-open mouths. He was never going to go in there again. Claustro. Dark except for the glow of fake suns on the "scenes." Funeral-parlor smell seeping through the sealant.

Don't go into the Steinhart Aquarium either. Remember *The Lady from Shanghai*? The seasick cameras shoot through and around the fish-tanks at Orson Welles and Rita Hayworth saying goodbye. The fish are moving, unctuously moving.

No Oriental Tea Garden either. "Oriental." Shit.

On the paths where no other human being was wending, he stepped over and between fallen trees into sudden fens of ferns and banana trees with no bananas. A wild strawberry—someone had been wounded and bled

a drop here—said, “Eat me,” but he didn’t obey, maybe poison. How come ripe when it isn’t even spring? There were no flowers in the Shakespeare Garden, its plants gone indistinguishably to leaf and twig.

Long before Ocean Beach and the Great Highway, he turned back into the woods. Eucalyptus, pine, and black oak—those three trees together is how you tell that you’re in Northern California and not Los Angeles. The last time he had walked along the ocean, he ended up at the zoo. Aquarium and dank zoo on the same day. “Fu-li-sah-kah Soo.” He said “Fleishhacker Zoo” to himself in Chinatown language, just to keep a hand in, so to speak, to remember and so to keep awhile longer words spoken by the people of his brief and dying culture. At Fu-li-sah-kah Soo, he once saw a monkey catch a flying pigeon and tear it up. In another cage, a tiger backed up to its wading pool and took a dump in it. The stained polar bears make you want to throw things at them and to bite into an eraser.

If it were Sunday, football roars would be rising out of Kezar Stadium, and everywhere you walk, in the woods, along the Chain of Lakes, at the paddock of buffaloes, you’d hear the united voice of the crowd, and the separate loudspeaker voice of the announcer doing the play-by-play. Football season. Good thing that when he was in school, an American of Japanese Ancestry had played on the Cal football team, and there had been a couple of A.J.A. pompon girls too. Otherwise, his manhood would have been even more totally destroyed than it was.

Having lost track of his whereabouts, Wittman was surprised by a snowy glass palace—the Conservatory—that coalesced out of the fog. A piece had sharded off and was floating to the right of the spire on top of the cupola—the day moon. Up the stairs to this fancy hothouse (built with Crocker money), where unlikely roses and cacti grow, climbed a man and a dog. They were the same color and leanness, the dog a Doberman pinscher. “Bitch. You fucking bitch.” The man was scolding the dog, the two of them walking fast, the dog pulling forward and the man pulling the short new chain taut. “Who do you think you are, bitch? Huh, bitch? You listening to me? Who the fuck do you think you are?” The man had plucked his eyebrows into the shapes of tadpoles, the same definition as the dog’s, which were light tan. The dog wore a shame look on its face, and its legs were bending with straint. “Bitch animal,” said the man, who looked nowhere but at his dog. “How could you, huh, bitch? Huh? You listening to me?” A yank on the choke-chain. “You hear me? You cuntless bitch.”

Along a side path came another Black man, this one pushing a shopping

cart transporting one red apple and a red bull from Tijuana. It was time, Wittman thought, to stop letting it all come in.

"Newspaper, sir?" said the man with the red bull. "Newspaper. Ten cents." He was holding out a folded page of newspaper. He was embracing an armload of these folios and quartos. Wittman had dimes in his pocket, so bought one. The man thanked him, and specially gave him a color insert from last Sunday's paper. He must be illiterate and not know that newspapers come out new every day.

Some children were climbing rocks. A little girl, who was at the top of the pile, jumped off, saying, "Don't tell *me* your personal problems." She talked like that because she copied women. "I got problems of my *own*," she said. The kid was ruined already. A shot of hate went from him to her that ought to have felled her, but up she climbed again. Wittman tossed his smoke and headed for an exit from the park.

Under a bush was a rag that had been squirted with blue paint. That rag had sucked a boy's breath and eaten up his brain cells. His traitorous hand that should have torn the rag away had pressed it against his face, smeared him blue, and made him drag in the fumes.

Wittman stood at the bus stop on the corner of Arguello and Fulton. He was avoiding the corner where the grizzly bear on one rock and the mountain lion with tensed shoulders on the opposite rock look down at you. The Muni bus came along on the cables not too much later. Continue. "I can't go on, I go on." "I can't go on comma I go on." Wow.

On the ride downtown, for quite a while—the spires of St. Ignatius to the left and the dome of City Hall straight ahead as if rising out of the center of the street—San Francisco seemed to be a city in a good dream. Past the gilded gates of the Opera House and Civic Auditorium. Past the Orpheum, once "the best vaudeville house in the West"; on the evening of the day of the Earthquake and Fire, its actors went to the park and sang an act from *Carmen*. In 1911, Count Ilya Tolstoy, the Tolstoy's son, lectured in the Orpheum on "Universal Peace." Wittman had heard the orotund voice of Lowell Thomas intone, "THIS IS CINERAMA!" The Embassy, the Golden Gate, U. A. Cinema, the Paramount, the Warfield, the St. Francis, the Esquire. Then the neighborhood of the Curran, the Geary, and the Marines Memorial, where he had seen the Actor's Workshop do *King Lear* with Michael O'Sullivan as Lear—"Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks." Out the bus window, he kept spotting people who offended him in their postures and gestures, their walks, their nose-blowing, their clothes, their facial ex-



pressions. Normal humanity, mean and wrong. He was a convict on a locked bus staring at the sights on the way from county jail to San Quentin. Breathe shallow so as not to smell the other passengers. It's true, isn't it, that molecules break off and float about, and go up your nose, and that's how you smell? Always some freak riding the Muni. And making eye contact. Wittman was the only passenger sitting on a crosswise seat in front; the other passengers, facing forward, were looking at him. Had he spoken aloud? They're about to make sudden faces, like in *El. Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the angels' hierarchies?* All right, then, all right. Out of a pocket, he took his Rilke. For such gone days, he carried *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* in his pea coat—and read out loud to his fellow riders: “ ‘My father had taken me with him to Urnekloster. . . . There remains whole in my heart, so it seems to me, only that large hall in which we used to gather for dinner every evening at seven o'clock. I never saw this room by day; I do not even remember whether it had windows or on what they looked out; always, whenever the family entered, the candles were burning in the ponderous branched candlesticks, and in a few minutes one forgot the time of day and all that one had seen outside. This lofty and, as I suspect, vaulted chamber was stronger than everything else. With its darkening height, with its never quite clarified corners, it sucked all images out of one without giving one any definite substitute for them. One sat there as if dissolved; entirely without will, without consciousness, without desire, without defence. One was like a vacant spot. I remember that at first this annihilating state almost caused me nausea; it brought on a kind of seasickness which I only overcame by stretching out my leg until I touched with my foot the knee of my father who sat opposite me. It did not strike me until afterwards that he seemed to understand, or at least to tolerate, this singular behavior, although there existed between us an almost cool relationship which would not account for such a gesture. Nevertheless it was this slight contact that gave me strength to support the long repasts. And after a few weeks of spasmodic endurance, I became, with the almost boundless adaptability of a child, so inured to the eeriness of these gatherings, that it no longer cost me effort to sit at table for two hours; now these hours passed comparatively swiftly, for I occupied myself in observing those present.’ ” Some of those present on the Muni were looking at the reader, some had closed their eyes, some looked out the window, everyone perhaps listening.

“ ‘My grandfather called them “the family,” and I also heard the others use the same term, which was entirely arbitrary.’ ” Wittman read on, reading the descriptions of the four persons at table. The bus driver did not tell



him to shut up, and he got to the good part: "The meal dragged along as usual, and we had just reached the dessert when my eye was caught and carried along by a movement going on, in the half-darkness, at the back of the room. In that quarter a door which I had been told led to the mezzanine floor, had opened little by little, and now, as I looked on with a feeling entirely new to me of curiosity and consternation, there stepped into the darkness of the doorway a slender lady in a light-colored dress, who came slowly toward us. I do not know whether I made any movement or any sound; the noise of a chair being overturned forced me to tear my eyes from that strange figure, and I caught sight of my father, who had jumped up now, his face pale as death, his hands clenched by his sides, going toward the lady. She, meantime, quite untouched by this scene, moved toward us, step by step, and was already not far from the Count's place, when he rose brusquely and, seizing my father by the arm, drew him back to the table and held him fast, while the strange lady, slowly and indifferently, traversed the space now left clear, step by step, through an indescribable stillness in which only a glass clinked trembling somewhere, and disappeared through a door in the opposite wall of the dining-hall.' "

None of the passengers was telling Wittman to cool it. It was pleasant, then, for them to ride the bus while Rilke shaded and polished the City's greys and golds. Here we are, Walt Whitman's "classless society" of "everyone who could read or be read to." Will one of these listening passengers please write to the City Council and suggest that there always be a reader on this route? Wittman has begun a someday tradition that may lead to a job as a reader riding the railroads throughout the West. On the train through Fresno—Saroyan; through the Salinas Valley—Steinbeck; through Monterey—*Cannery Row*; along the Big Sur ocean—Jack Kerouac; on the way to Weed—*Of Mice and Men*; in the Mother Lode—Mark Twain and Robert Louis Stevenson, who went on a honeymoon in *The Silverado Squatters*; *Roughing It* through Calaveras County and the Sacramento Valley; through the redwoods—John Muir; up into the Rockies—*The Big Rock Candy Mountain* by Wallace Stegner. Hollywood and San Elmo with John Fante. And all of the Central Valley on the Southern Pacific with migrant Carlos Bulosan, *America Is in the Heart*. What a repertoire. A lifetime reading job. And he had yet to check out Gertrude Atherton, and Jack London of Oakland, and Ambrose Bierce of San Francisco. And to find "Relocation" Camp diaries to read in his fierce voice when the train goes through Elk Grove and other places where the land once belonged to the A.J.A.s. He will refuse to be a reader of racist Frank Norris. He won't read Bret