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Interview with Author

Jessica Hagedorn

by Terry Hong




photo by David Shankbone

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Eight years have passed (far too quickly) since I last saw the inimitable Jessica Hagedorn. Her 2003 novel, *Dream Jungle*, was about to come out and we were in desperate search of boba tea in New York's East Village. Faced with a closed tea salon (one of her favorites), Hagedorn met my disappointment with a comforting hug and we settled instead on a nearby Japanese restaurant. Noshing with a legend, I can't remember a thing I ate ... it was all about the stellar company, after all.

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Born and raised in the Philippines, arriving in the United States in her early teens, Hagedorn entered the literary world fully formed: her now-classic coming-of-age debut novel, *Dogeaters*, garnered a highly coveted National Book Award nomination in 1990. In the two decades since, Hagedorn has been recognized as both a leader and a mentor at the forefront of Asian Pacific America

reader and a mentor at the forefront of Asian Pacific America with her compilation of Asian Pacific American writings, *Charlie Chan Is Dead: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Fiction* and *Charlie Chan Is Dead 2: At Home in the World: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Fiction*, both of which she edited, in addition to her various other novels, poetry, films, plays, multimedia performance pieces, and a musical.

Eight years after *Dream Jungle*—in which Hagedorn intertwines the alleged discovery of an ancient “lost tribe” in the remote hills of the Philippines with the problematic filming of *Apocalypse Now*—Hagedorn’s much-awaited new novel, *Toxicology*, hit shelves earlier this year in April. Populated with her usual cast of unpredictable characters, *Toxicology* opens with the spectacular death of a beloved young actor. Separately joining the multiplying crowd of shocked mourners outside the actor’s apartment are Mimi Smith—a filmmaker with a minor cult slasher hit who is suffering through a rough patch both creatively and personally—and her estranged, 14-year-old daughter Violet. Across the East River, Mimi’s older brother Melo is trying to stay sober, and is convinced that their cousin Agnes has met a sinister end at the hands of her wealthy New Jersey employers. Down the hall from Mimi, her neighbor Eleanor Delacroix – once a famous writer, now an eccentric octogenarian addicted to cocaine and alcohol—has effectively shut herself in while mourning the death of her long-time lover and partner, the renowned artist Yvonne Wilder. Brought together by loneliness—not to mention the flowing booze and drugs—Mimi and Eleanor’s disparate lives dovetail one into the other, as both find a strange comfort in their acerbic exchanges and desperate binges.

Always fascinated by Hagedorn’s writing, I recently caught up with her by phone (“some things never change,” she assures me about her phone number). We laughed, sighed, cackled, debated, and generally plotted to take over the universe ...

Terry Hong: Of course, I have so much to ask you, but we’ll start with *Toxicology*. We always have to start with a book! In the last couple of your major works, a factual death sparked your fiction ... the passing of Manuel Elizalde Jr. for *Dream Jungle*, then Andrew Cunanan’s multiple murders/suicide for your musical *Most Wanted*. *Toxicology* also opens with death—the possible suicide/accidental overdose of a bad-boy Hollywood star ... dare I say, Heath Ledger came immediately to mind. Any chance that this ‘you-can’t-make-this-stuff-up’ event ignited what became *Toxicology*?

Jessica Hagedorn: I so remember that day it [Ledger’s death] happened, how fascinating it was that such a wide range of people were affected by his passing. For a lot of us, he wasn’t just another movie or pop star who died too young. Something about Heath Ledger and his vulnerability and great talent moved people. That day, I heard from writer friends who only watch artsy fartsy movies, from my kids and my colleagues at work, a really wide range of people, and the solemn mood was the same for all. The country was already in a deep funk over dirty politics, dirty wars, the recession, and all that—and this sudden, intimate, human tragedy seemed to bring folks together. It was also a very New York City event. And yes, Ledger’s unfortunate death jump started the opening chapter to *Toxicology*.

TH: Like your other novels, *Toxicology* has a diverse, sprawling cast of characters ... where do you find these people? How much of your own real life makes its way onto your pages (and stages,

too)?

JH: I'm one of those writers who is drawn to complicated and vivid personalities, flawed characters who live difficult lives, who are often exasperating and infuriating. One doesn't have to look very far—these characters are all around us. A group of high school students recently asked me what makes a compelling character. I told them I often stay away from characters who have everything they want, because they tend to be uninteresting. There are exceptions to this rule, of course. Maybe the fact that you have everything becomes the point where the profound struggle begins. As for pulling from my own life—it's a mix of empathy and imagination most of the time.

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novels inflict the most pain ... is that true for you, too?

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Playwriting is the exact opposite process for me because it's so collaborative. If you're blessed with a terrific cast, a visionary director, an innovative sound and design team, then your play has a 99% chance of being realized in the best possible way. I think people forget—even some of my most aware graduate students!—that writing is hard work. Period.

TH: In the midst of telling a rollercoaster-ride of a story in *Toxicology*, you've also managed to weave in quite a few hot-button topics, including illegal immigration, hidden slavery among America's rich, class issues, missing parents, sexuality, addiction, etc. etc. How do you keep yourself up to date with everything going on in the world? Do you find yourself constantly in research mode—reading, watching, soaking in current events?

JH: It depends on the event, but I am a naturally curious person. And if something resonates with me as potential material, then I go for it.

TH: Do people ever say, "That's me!" after they read or see your work?

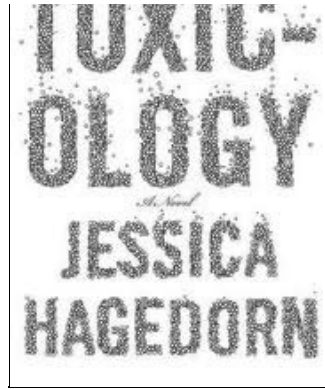
JH: No, no one has ever said that. They might chortle a bit, and ask, "Is that so-and-so?" but no, no one has ever asked if they were actually the inspiration for one of my characters. Making up a character is sometimes about creating a composite. For example, Romeo Byron in *Toxicology* may have been inspired by bits of Heath Ledger, but Romeo is also very much NOT Heath Ledger.

TH: At one point in *Toxicology*, Eleanor quotes Hemingway about writing not being for sissies and how



I love accessing news from all over the world, especially human interest stories, stuff you just can't make up. Like maybe four lines about something remarkable that happened in Uzbekistan between a man and a bear. I'll take that bit of information and reimagine it happening in a totally different place and time, and that might become my next story.

With *Toxicology*, I wanted to write about New York, how gentrification has changed us, what it means to be American and an artist, what it takes to be an artist today as opposed to 10 years ago. This novel presented an exciting challenge: exploring the digital world, obsessions with real estate, the acquisition of endless gadgets, the constant rush to be up on everything, the name-dropping ... Warhol's '15 Minutes of Fame' as the plague that has engulfed us.



TH: So being a New Yorker in the midst of all that chaos and drama, how do you unplug? Do you ever unplug?

JH: Sure! I can and do unplug anywhere—it just takes discipline, although sometimes I don't have it. The obvious thing is to drag yourself to the gym and run on the treadmill—for me, that's fantastic. Running is a monotonous, strangely exhilarating routine where I can work out writing problems in my head.

Another way I unplug is cooking. If you have some sort of crap going on in your life, just chop 300 garlic bulbs, simmer in olive oil, and I promise you'll feel better! I turn the music up—fantastic music in another language—and tune everything else out while I focus on creating the food. It's such a pleasurable process. And even if I muck it up, who cares? Seeing good friends, watching terrible movies together or wonderful movies we've forgotten about ... that's a beautiful way of unplugging, too. I share a routine with my pals: we cook, we drink, we choose movies, we all have a fabulous time. That kind of community is something we big-city dwellers crave—everyone works so damn hard at whatever they're doing to the point that even though we live in the same city, scheduling a simple get-together is next to impossible. But these gatherings are extremely necessary and life-affirming. We talk about books, we talk about plays and films we've seen, the music we've recently heard. And we get to just bitch and moan and vent. And that's always a tonic.

TH: While Mimi and her daughter Violet have a very difficult relationship in *Toxicology*, your own mother/daughter bonds have been creatively rich ... you collaborated on a film project with your younger daughter when she was barely in her teens, and you co-wrote a small poetry collection, *Visions of a Daughter, Foretold*, with your older daughter. Will we see more joint creative projects? Do you think both

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projects? Do you think both daughters will continue their creative pursuits?

JH: Both daughters are soulful and empathetic young women. Whatever path they choose to take, however they decide to use their creative talents, I'm here to support them.

TH: Over two decades ago, you published *Dogeaters* which immediately brought you literary awards/accolades/fame. Since its success, do you feel you're often thrust into the position of being *the* literary, creative representative of the Filipina American community? Are you ever resentful?

JH: Being thrust in the position of literary representative of the Philippines is sort of understandable but ridiculous. A lot of it stems from laziness: folks often rely on one source for all the answers and don't want to do their homework. I have to remind people that my perspective and experience are my own, that I'm not the *only* Filipina American writer out there. The list of notable Filipino American authors has grown considerably since *Dogeaters* was published in 1990—which is all good!

TH: And who are some of those Filipino American writers we should be checking out?

JH: R. Zamora Linmark's epic and bittersweet novel, *Leche*, was published by Coffee House around the same time as *Toxicology*. We had a blast doing a lot of readings together this past April and May. I just finished reading a galley of Lysley Tenorio's short story collection, called *Monstress*, which is due out early next year from HarperCollins. It's a fabulous collection, really original.

Another writer is Miguel Syjuco, who wrote *Ilustrado*, which has done really well. Miguel was my student at Columbia's MFA Writing Program way back ... about a million years ago. Also, Gina Apostol, who had one of her stories in the second *Charlie Chan*, is a marvelous, very experimental fiction writer. Eric Gamalinda also has a new novel in the works that I can't wait to read. So does the brilliant and prolific Han Ong.

TH: Do you ever feel like you're a fully American (no other preceding modifiers, please) writer, American playwright, American artist? Do you want to be considered as such?

JH: I believe that the present and most of the future is going to be about having more than one identity—Tea Party be damned. F**k it—as the writer Teju Coles says, "My passport is blue."

TH: How often do you go to the Philippines? Is it still 'home'? Do you still have extended family there?

JH: My immediate family has immigrated to Hawai'i and California. But I do have many, many nieces and nephews who remain in the Philippines. It's a country I will always think of as my childhood home. My parents and grandparents have all passed away, so I don't go back as often as I used to. Flying now is such a pain in the ass, such a deeply unpleasant experience. I wish they could just hologram me over. I do love the *there*, just not the journey anymore. After 9/11, [the authorities] have made it hell. The last time I was in Manila was in 2007, when Bobby Garcia directed the play version of *Dogeaters*. It was an incredible and intense experience.

TH: And for your mixed-heritage daughters, do they feel attached to, pulled by their Filipina roots?

interviewed by, paired by, when I'm not reading.

JH: I can't really answer for them. My younger daughter has been asking me more [about being Filipina] and has expressed a desire to go for a visit with me. It would be lovely to share what I know of the culture and travel with her. I took my older daughter for an extended stay when she was 4, while I was writing the last half of *Dogeaters*. But that was a very long time ago; even when I show her the photos from our time there, it all seems like a dream.

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TH: With all those creative monikers—novelist, poet, playwright, filmmaker, performance artist—do you have a preference for medium? Since *Dream Jungle*, I think you’ve done more theater than prose/poetry in the last few years. Is that right? How do you decide which project you might do next? Or are you always working in multiple platforms?

JH: I love writing for the theater; I love writing novels. I don’t do performance art anymore—

but Jesus Christ! I *will* do a walk-on for your piece, Terry! Yes, that I’ll do!

I was recently at Joe’s

Pub [at the Public Theater in New York] for a pre-book tour event. I read from *Toxicology* as part of their “Happy Ending Music and Reading Series”—writers get invited to read a short excerpt, then do one risky thing on stage. “Risky” means something a writer’s always wanted to do in front of an audience, but maybe is too shy to ever try. You can tell a story, sing a song, play the piano ... One writer, for example, cut someone’s hair on stage! Wish I’d thought of that. You have exactly five minutes to do this risky bit of business.

I performed with composer Mark Bennett and his dog, a gorgeous, lovable playboy boxer named Cassius. I sang [Antonio Carlos] Jobim’s “The Waters of March” to Cassius while Mark accompanied me on piano. Of course, the dog stole the show. That was my ‘hey, I could do this again!’-moment. Those opportunities are precious, but I also have to prioritize. Writing takes up time, as does teaching. Right now I’m helping to develop a new MFA writing program at Long Island University in Brooklyn’s Fort Greene; I’ve been there for three years and find it immensely gratifying.

Between the writing, cooking, writing, bitching, moaning, writing, running on the treadmill, hanging with my daughters, and taking Spanish lessons, I’m very busy! It’s a good time in my life.

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