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# Vision and Reinvention: Julie Wu's The Third Son

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by Terry Hong

So how many detours can a writer make before becoming that writer?

If you're newbie novelist **Julie Wu**—who knew as a Harvard undergraduate in the 1980s that writing was what she wanted to do—the answer might include a Master's program in opera performance (after serious training in the violin), medical school and the related internships and residencies required to become a doctor, a successful Boston-area practice, and motherhood.

Two decades-plus ago (but who's counting?), Wu was "too intimidated to try writing," as she revealed in an April interview for TaiwaneseAmerican.org. The award-winning novelist-to-be **Allegra Goodman** lived in Wu's dorm, having already published, while other fellow Harvardites were also writing novels. Despite the encouragement of a teacher who admired Wu's first freshman expository writing assignment so much that she suggested Wu move into a creative writing section, Wu decided instead to be "practical." She thought about taking a short story class but didn't have anything to submit for the application. She kept reading—"I simply love novels—the immersive nature of them. They're really the original virtual reality programs, made to run on your brain"—and graduated with a degree in literature. Her own writing was yet to come.

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## THIS WEEK AT BLOOM

Vision and Reinvention: Julie Wu's The Third Son

Then at 22, Wu had a vision about “a little boy in Taiwan—it was so vivid I rushed immediately to write it all down, and that’s when I realized that that was how to write—that it wasn’t just pushing words around, it was about having a vision and really communicating that vision to other people.” She planned on a novel—“I wanted to be, you know, Tolstoy”—but another almost-quarter century would pass before Wu’s debut novel, *The Third Son*, finally hit shelves in April earlier this year just after she turned 46.



Wu began writing in earnest in 2001, producing Tolstoy-worthy lengths before eventually distilling her original vivid vision down to just over 300 pages: “I lost track of the number of revisions. I didn’t even print them all out, but I have drawers, trunks, and filing cabinets filled with drafts. Someday I’ll have a big bonfire,” she told **Jaime Boler** of Bookmagnet. She estimates she kept a mere 2% of the original draft.

The one element that remained unwavering throughout was, of course that “little boy in Taiwan.” He became Wu’s eponymous “third son,” Saburo Tong, who is more comfortable with his Japanese first name than his unfamiliar Taiwanese moniker Tong Chia-lin. Born into a politically prominent family in Japanese-controlled Taiwan, Saburo comes of age in the 1940s and ’50s, a tumultuous time on his small island home as it moves from Japanese control to U.S. invasion to mainland Chinese domination. Inextricably woven with Saburo’s narrative is the violent history of Taiwan’s 228 Incident, which began with the Taiwanese uprising against the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) government on February 27, 1947, resulted in the brutal massacre of 10-30,000 Taiwanese on February 28 (“228”), and ushered in the White Terror, a period of martial law that lasted nearly four decades during which thousands of citizens were harassed, imprisoned, and murdered.

Wu’s Taiwanese history lesson makes her novel “a new entry into the genre that, for the first time in U.S. fiction, includes the events of the 228 Incident and the White Terror period,” according to a 2012 feature article in *Taipei Times* by **Dan Bloom**. To ensure accuracy, Wu traveled to Taiwan in her 20s to conduct extensive research, and eventually had two historians check the manuscript to verify her facts. She initially frightened her parents with her political inclusions: “[t]hey were afraid there would be repercussions,” Wu told TaiwaneseAmerican.org.

And yet, Wu found her best sources within her immediate family. About to become a parent herself, Wu began to interview her father in earnest.

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Although she was “almost convinced to dismiss his childhood entirely,” Wu listened carefully to his stories that began with “My memories of my childhood . . . are not exactly happy,” she recalls in an article she wrote for *Columbia Medicine* magazine. The vivid image of the little boy that haunted her at 22 turned out to be the father before her now, more than a dozen years later: “I had to grow up to let the boy tell his own story and find out that he was, in fact, the hero I was always looking for.” Although she “changed many facts—major ones—to increase the unity and drama of the story,” she explains, “[t]he emotional journey remains my father’s.”

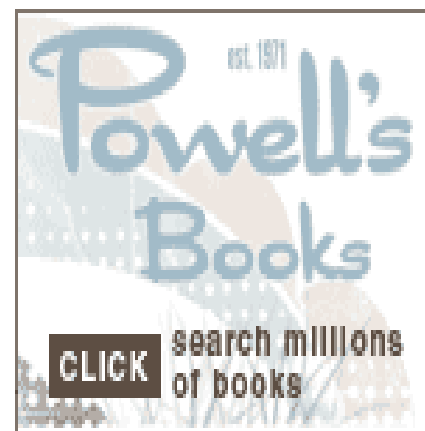


*The Third Son* begins thus: “My journey began when the Americans bombed us, in 1943, because it was during bombings that I met the girl.” Saburo is 8, one of seven children of an autocratic father and an abusive mother. Wartime wreaks havoc on all, but Saburo is cruelly made the scapegoat of his sprawling family. Blamed for the death of a younger brother, Saburo is

regularly beaten for minor offenses (or no offenses, more often than not), denied proper nutrition, and prevented from receiving an education. When a sympathetic tutor comes to the family home to teach Saburo’s two older brothers and tells the mother of Saburo’s considerable talents, she bars him from even being in the house during the daily sessions.

As a young boy, his “first tender moment of [his] life” comes almost at the cost of his very existence. As U.S. planes fly overhead, Saburo helps a young girl, Yoshiko, escape to safety, and watches with longing as her older brother comes in search of her: “Their gestures of intimacy came so naturally to them but were so wildly foreign to me that I stared.” When Saburo finally manages to get home, he’s met with only derision—and yet another beating. “A child’s body is not designed to withstand the kind of blows that an adult can wield with the better part of a tree. Or rather, the child can withstand in the sense of survival, but the nerve endings will never be completely restored. They will remain raw and painful for the rest of the child’s life.”

In spite of his family—who needs enemies with parents and siblings like these?—Saburo miraculously thrives. He holds on to that single glimpse of tenderness until he meets Yoshiko again years later. Devastated when he



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learns that she is his oldest brother's intended, he nevertheless refuses to let her go. Relegated to a less-than-stellar technical college, he manages to pass the national exam that even the country's most elite university graduates can't master (including his entitled older brother), and gets himself to the United States where he has the chance to reinvent himself as scholar and (rocket!) scientist.

Reinvention is clearly a family—both fictional and real—trait, as Wu herself proves. From violinist to lyric soprano to primary care physician to mother, Wu “really, really enjoyed my patients, but when I had my children I basically had to decide how to allot my time.” After doctoring for a few years, she realized, “I really wanted to write my book by then, and I couldn't personally write, take care of my kids, and practice medicine at the same time, so I stopped practicing medicine.”

All those multiple lives went into creating that first novel (Wu's already working on her next): “[Y]ou'll find that a lot of [writers] have tried out multiple careers,” she observes. “It's part of being curious and being able to imagine yourself in a lot of different people's shoes, and not feeling fettered to one particular path. It's also part of being American, I should say. Not too many educational systems in the world other than ours will accept a literature major into med school”—even if that doctor eventually decides to return to the books. For now, for Wu, it's finally all about the books.



*Terry Hong writes [BookDragon](#), a book review blog for the [Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center](#).*

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