

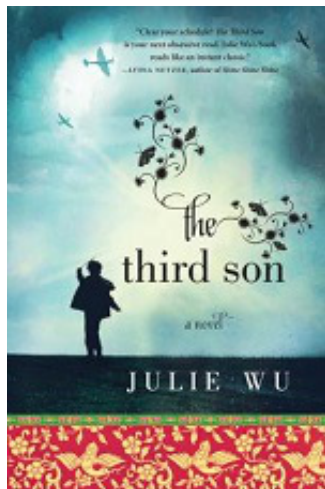
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Q&A with Julie Wu

Posted on October 30, 2013 by BLOOM

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by Terry Hong



At 22, **Julie Wu** had a “vision” about a sad young boy that she immediately rushed to capture in words. From those initial notes, she would take almost a quarter century to bring him to the page: at age 46, she “bloomed” as a first-time novelist. *The Third Son*, about a Taiwanese boy and his journey from being the abused son in a privileged family to his reinvention as a successful American immigrant, finally hit shelves in April this year.

Terry Hong: I just discovered this humorous post you did for *Beyond the Margins*: “[What It Means When Your Reviewer is Mean, Unfair, and Totally Doesn’t Get It](#),” in which you “fess up” about your own state of mind when you wrote a negative review of a medical article years ago. So have you encountered any bad reviews of *The Third Son*? If so, how did you react?

Julie Wu: Oh, of course. I know that reading taste is so individualized. I’ve been lucky that the majority of the reviews have been so positive, but when I get a bad one I read it and see if it makes sense to me. If I find a common thread in bad reviews, I should take note. If I find [it] totally different from what others say, I chalk it up to taste.

Welcome to Bloom — where you’ll encounter the work and lives of authors whose first books were published when they were 40 or older; who bloomed in their own good time.

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TH: And what might you say to such a reviewer if you ever met him or her?

JW: I guess I would say I'm sorry you didn't like my book. Hope you like my next one!

TH: I take it you're not the confrontational type . . . no spats at the next AWP, huh?

JW: No—you can't browbeat someone into liking your book.

TH: So at 46, let's say you're almost half-way to the other side, so to speak . . . our generation might easily live to be 100 apparently. And, even better, you're a doctor, so you can heal yourself. You've had many incarnations during your first half—violinist, opera singer, doctor, mother. The "mother"-title you'll keep forever, of course. So what about "writer"? Think this one will stick for a while?

JW: I view the "writer" role as my ultimate one. It encompasses the whole of my life's experience. Everything I have goes into a piece of writing.

TH: Having fulfilled the stereotypical Asian immigrant parents' dream of becoming a doctor, how did they react when you decided to give up your practice and devote yourself full time to writing? Do you think you'll ever go back to doctor-ing?

JW: Well, I kind of took the backdoor route to a full time writing career. I had kids first, so the reason I gave for quitting my medical job was to take care of them. And once I was home, well . . .

TH: . . . and an immigrant grandparent wants ONLY the best for their precious grandchildren!

JW: Exactly! And it's possible I'll go back in some capacity. We'll see.

TH: Let's talk *Third Son*—which was almost a quarter-century in the making. Through the many, MANY drafts and revisions, you kept some two percent of the original draft—I read a quote that said the final was 98 percent different from the first draft. What was that writing process like?

JW: It was a tremendous learning experience. It took all that time for me to mature as a person and a writer, for Taiwan to develop free speech, and for **AI Gore** to invent the Internet as it now stands.

TH: The *Taipei Times* reported in an [article last fall](#) that yours is the first novel

The Third Son

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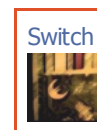
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in English that talks about the 228 Incident and the subsequent White Terror. So your debut title has made literary history! How have your readers, especially Chinese Americans, responded to the history lesson you've woven into your epic story?

JW: The response has been really interesting and has differed enormously, depending on demographic. Non-Asians typically respond mostly to the story and are surprised at the history. Many Taiwanese Americans (especially the ones who call themselves “real Taiwanese”) are tremendously grateful to see the history that they have experienced or heard of from their parents. The non-Taiwanese Chinese Americans are more reserved. Not necessarily surprised but less enthusiastic. A couple of my nastiest reviews on Goodreads are actually from people whose names sound Chinese, and I had to wonder how much of their nastiness was due to being offended at the book's portrayal of Chinese.

TH: Let's move off-island, so to speak: Beyond post-World War II Taiwanese history, *Third Son* also exposes/uncovers the impact and role of the Nationalists in mainland China, as well as in Chinatowns across the U.S. You have numerous mysterious black suits running around in your novel. Have you gotten any specific responses to this American side of this controversial history?

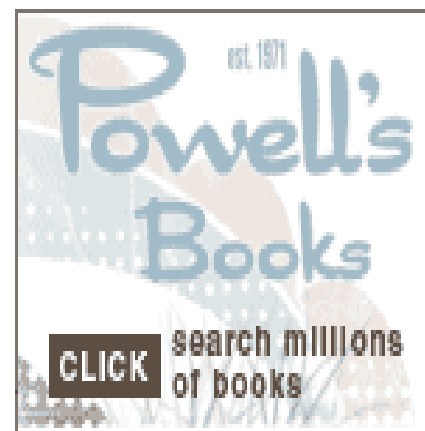
JW: Only that it was accurate. It was all based on fact.

TH: Again, thanks to Al Gore, huh?

JW: There are books on the topic, as well. *Fires of the Dragon* by David E. Kaplan goes in detail into the Kuomintang's actions in the U.S.

TH: Since *The Third Son* is based on your parents' experiences in Taiwan and their Stateside immigration, how much of the novel is 'true' and how much comes from your imagination? Did you ever feel conflicted about changing their story?

JW: I tell people that the emotional journey is very much my father's, but the actual facts surrounding it in the book are different. Deciding to change the facts was a huge hurdle for me. Eventually I had to decide whether to write a truthful story that only my family would be interested in reading, or whether to write the best story I could so that anyone would want to read it. I chose the latter.



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TH: Surely your parents have read the book . . . reactions? Your siblings and/or other close family members? Was your parents' history a surprise for them?

JW: My parents have been reading drafts all through the different transformations of the book. For them, the divergence from their true story was also a big hurdle to get over, but they have come around to seeing—especially now that the book has been so well received—why it was necessary. In general they're very pleased and proud, though my father sometimes says he'll write a memoir with the true facts.

My sister and brother knew the generalities about my parents' stories, but they were surprised by a few of the details.

TH: And what about any of your Taiwanese relatives? Has the novel been—or will it be—translated into Taiwanese and/or Mandarin in the future?

JW: My Taiwanese relatives don't seem to be aware of the book. I'm hoping it will be translated soon, but my agent tells me the publishers there are a bit scared to publish it.

TH: Does that mean free speech is still a problem in Taiwan? Do the publishers fear for your personal safety? Do you ever feel threatened when you visit Taiwan?

JW: There is technically not a problem with free speech there now. There are in fact museums documenting the human rights abuses of the White Terror and 228, and there are many accounts published in Chinese. From what I hear, the major problem is not wanting to appear pro-independence in a way that rankles China and threatens the tenuous relationship there. Either that or my agent hasn't really tried that hard to sell there.

It's totally safe to visit Taiwan. I went there last October, touring human rights museums and interviewing former political prisoners. I only wish I'd had more time to enjoy the country and its food. I didn't even have time to visit Taipei 101 [the world's tallest building until 2004].

TH: With 98 percent of your original left over—some of it you've saved, some of it you might use for a bonfire, you mentioned in another interview—might there be another book buried in all that discarded backstory?

JW: Oh sure! It'll come out in different ways in future work, maybe not as a book in and of itself.

TH: So talking about future books, what are you working on now? And where are you in the process . . . we're not looking at another quarter-century . . . or . . . ?

JW: My trip last October was to research my current book, which will be a novel about political prisoners in the White Terror. If my kids stay at their respective schools, it shouldn't take me as long as the first book.

TH: Since you've made Taiwanese American literary history with *Third Son*, do you worry that you might get labeled as a Taiwanese American novelist, as opposed to the more general moniker of "writer"? Looking further ahead, since you've claimed "writer" as your ultimate role, do you think you might ever write a so-called non-ethnic story?

JW: I don't really worry about things like that. I've written stories from non-Taiwanese viewpoints before and will again, I'm sure. It so happens that I find Taiwanese history really interesting, and it sorely needs some attention, so I'm focusing there for now.

TH: Related to those non-ethnic stories/possible novels in the future . . . did you see this article, by chance? "[The One Thing White Writers Get Away With, But Authors of Color Don't](#)" from last week. As a writer of color, any thoughts/reactions?



JW: I hadn't seen it. It's interesting. People will always argue about these things—a lot of people were upset by *The Help* because it was written by a white woman. You could take issue with my book as well, as I have not lived in Taiwan and I'm not a man. I've also never been to South Dakota, Ann Arbor, or Manitoba. Sometimes we take subjects on BECAUSE they're strange to us, and we find it interesting to imagine them and maybe try out a different point of view. As for the reaction—who the heck knows how people will respond? It's not worth

worrying about, in my opinion.



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

Click [here](#) to read Terry Hong's feature piece on Julie Wu and *The Third Son*.

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