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# Q&A With Nina Schuyler

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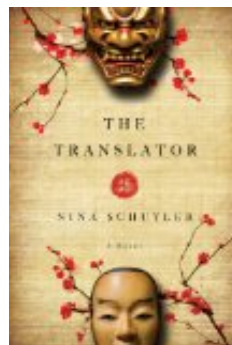
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by Terry Hong

*With all the vastness of the internet, I had quite a difficult time finding answers to the sorts of questions I had about **Nina Schuyler** and her relationship to her fiction—most especially regarding race and identity. (I know, so loaded!)*

*In both of her lauded novels—[The Painting](#) (2004) and [The Translator](#) (2013)—Schuyler takes a giant leap into a country, culture, language, even gender into which she was not born...and unlike some who have attempted such chameleonic feats (and succumbed wholly to cringe-inducing exotic pandering), Schuyler is sensitively attuned, carefully authentic, and thoroughly convincing.*

*So when I wrote the [feature](#) about Schuyler, I felt a bit restricted because I couldn't write what I didn't know. How grateful was I to get the chance to find out more from Schuyler herself! (Her name, by the way, is pronounced NIGH-nah SKY-ler, and not "Nee-nah Shoe-ler," as narrator Kirsten Potter mistakenly refers to her in the audio version of Schuyler's *The Translator*. Choose the page!)*



**Terry Hong:** Let's start with some obvious questions about language...how many do you speak, read, or write?

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## THIS WEEK AT BLOOM

Q&A With Nina Schuyler  
Nina Schuyler: "Like most writers, I

**Nina Schuyler:** I speak enough Japanese to be dangerous. On a recent visit to Japan, I asked an elderly Japanese woman for directions to a tea house and ended up at a cemetery. Long ago, I learned Spanish. Now that my two sons are learning it, I, thankfully, am finding my way again in that language. When I lived in Denmark as a university student, I learned Danish. Unfortunately, that language has faded and I'm left with only one phrase: "May I have a cup of tea?"

**TH:** Might I assume that English is your first language? Your last name is Dutch—is that also your family's background?

**NS:** It is. I'm Dutch on my Dad's side. Pennsylvania Dutch, actually. I grew up knowing a little bit about my heritage, but it wasn't dominant by any means. My father talked to us early on about the intersection of the Dutch and the Japanese, how the Dutch were one of the rare groups of foreigners allowed to live in Japan, though in confined quarters.

**TH:** What drew you to learn other languages?

**NS:** I think the allure of languages is intertwined with my love of words. In my novel *The Translator*, my protagonist, Hanne Schubert, says she learned seven languages, not to converse with the world, but to make an array of sounds. I understand this appeal.

Unlike my protagonist, however, I want to converse, to reach across the silent, lonely gap and speak, not in my native tongue, but in someone else's. My attempts, however faulty, always unfold into something memorable.

**TH:** And being so facile with languages—and your latest novel bears the title *The Translator*—have you ever considered taking on translating projects?

**NS:** With my Japanese teacher, I've translated Japanese poetry. My small, feeble efforts have shown me how much skill and art there is in moving from one language into another.

**TH:** Both your novels have been woven around an intersection of East and West—certainly the twain meet in your work. Where did that impetus come from?

**NS:** When I was growing up, my father often traveled to Japan for work. He'd bring back the usual souvenirs—Japanese fans, geisha dolls in glass boxes, origami birds, chopsticks, and the occasional bonsai tree. The aesthetic was so different from the West, pared down, simple lines. It seemed the

work at the edges of the day"

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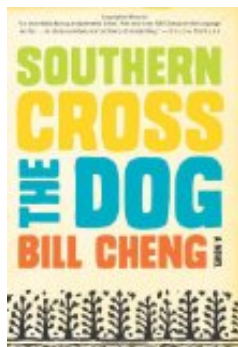
embodiment of grace, and I was transfixed. I began to read about Japanese art and artists, and from there, I wanted to learn the language, which I studied in college and then after I graduated. I embarked on that adventure, not knowing I'd be learning three alphabets, and that it would take about 3,000 Kanji to read a newspaper. I also studied Japanese economics, with a fabulous professor who wove in psychology, society, and Japanese culture.

Because I am from the West, I see how much the two worlds—East and West—could learn from each other. I know that sounds idealistic—so be it. In my novel, Hanne Schubert moves from her isolated, lonely state to awareness of community and the other. This movement is, in some sense, representative of how the West could stand to absorb some of the lessons of the East. That is, the West, with its hyperbolic emphasis on the individual and individual rights, and the East, with its emphasis on community and harmony and the public good.

**TH:** Inspired by your father's travels, have you lived in Japan? I know you've visited, but residency provides such a different experience....And have you lived in other countries?

**NS:** I lived in Denmark for nine months during college while I was studying international economics. It was a great program.

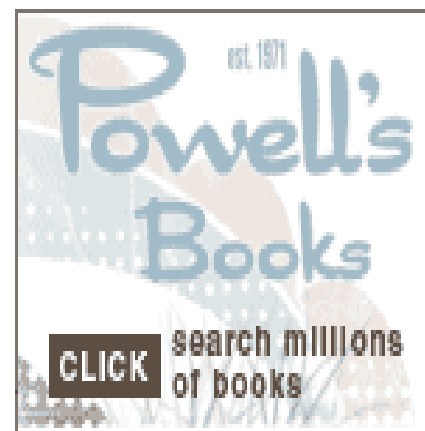
I lived in Japan for three months. My sister, however, lived there for eight years because of her husband's job. That made traveling convenient. I went to learn more of the Japanese language, and experience the culture. I wanted the opportunity to immerse myself there.



**TH:** When writers of color write beyond that color, the publishing industry seems to go a bit nuts: Korean American **Chang-rae Lee's** *Aloft* drew significant attention for featuring an Italian American protagonist; more recently, Chinese American **Bill Cheng** certainly found greater notoriety for writing about southern African Americans than the remarkable quality of his debut *Southern Cross the Dog: A Novel*. So as a white person, have you ever been criticized for writing beyond your race? And if not, is this something you

think or worry about?

**NS:** I love this line from **Grace Paley**: "If, before you sit down with paper and pencil...it all comes suddenly clear and you find yourself mumbling, of course, he's a sadist and she's a masochist, and you think you have the



## CATEGORIES

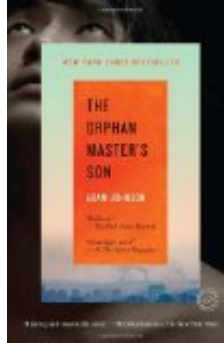
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answer—drop the subject.”

It seems to me, when you write and when you read, you’re supposed to go stand on a different street corner for a while, see things from a perspective that’s not in line with your own truths, beliefs, [and] stereotypes. Reading and writing should be a disruptive act. That may mean writing from the opposite gender’s point of view, from a different ethnicity, economic status, religious affiliation, a different time period—the list of where you might choose to stand is very long.

**TH:** These ‘disruptive’ points of view, however, seem to be unquestioned, unchallenged, when a non-ethnically identifiable writer creates characters of color, in unfamiliar settings (except, of course, if you’re **Arthur Golden** and your exotica is so egregious that the person on whose life you supposedly based your novel sued you and was awarded a substantial sum). The mainstream media, for example, had few comments about **Adam Johnson** “stand[ing] on a different street corner,” to use your words, for his Pulitzer Prize–winning *The Orphan Master’s Son: A Novel (Pulitzer Prize for Fiction)* (which I thought was superb). In contrast, almost every review noted Bill Cheng’s Chinese American identity because *Southern Cross the Dog*’s characters were not. It seems if you’re white, even in our so-called post-racial 21st century, any street corner is open to you. If you’re not, then only a select few allow you entrance. Have you noticed this as you’re venturing from one corner to another?



**NS:** It’s a simplistic and naive and, frankly, discriminatory to require writers to stay only within the confines of their ethnic boundaries. But publishing has double standards—white writers can venture where they will, and when a non-Caucasian writer does something similar, that makes the lead of their book’s review. Yet, as I said earlier, one of the great endeavors of fiction is for the writer to step outside his or her comfort zone, to experience empathy for someone or something else. And if you’re not doing that, I’m not sure what you’re doing.

A different issue is whether or not a writer can be successful in changing ethnicity or culture or gender. I have a student in my creative writing class at the University of San Francisco who wants to write about a Japanese American soldier during World War II. “I don’t know what it was like back then,” she said. “Well, of course, you don’t,” I told her. “You need to find original documents, talk to people, discover their stories, do research, and keep

reading and searching until you can imagine the time, the people, back then.”

That stepping outside of who you are—there are definite ways to do so. If you have the passion, please do.

**TH:** In a couple of interviews, I've read about your thoughts on the “hierarchy” of fiction vs. women’s fiction: “The not-so-subtle undertone is that ‘women’s fiction’ is not as good, serious or important as ‘fiction,’” you told **Amy Sue Nathan** in an [interview](#) for her Women’s Fiction Writers website. Could you tell our Bloom readers a little more about your thoughts here?

**NS:** When you add a qualifier to the term “fiction,” you are setting up a tier system. There is the “fiction,” which is the gold standard, and there are subsets, which implicitly suggest a value to the work, unfortunately a lesser value.

Today, we have “women’s fiction,” “immigrant’s fiction.” I’ve been to bookstores where there is “African American fiction,” “Southeast Asian,” “Southern fiction,” etc. (In terms of definition, the term “women’s fiction” is typically assigned to fiction written by women, in which there is a female protagonist.) I appreciate what **Jhumpa Lahiri** said in a 2013 *New York Times* article. She was asked what immigrant fiction has been most important to her. Her response: “I don’t know what to make of the term “immigrant fiction. ...If certain books are to be termed immigrant fiction, what do we call the rest? Native fiction? Puritan fiction?”

So if we have “women’s fiction,” should we have “men’s fiction”? And if not, why not?

All of this would be an interesting theoretical discussion, but there are unfortunate consequences. One look at the numbers supplied by [VIDA](#) shows how women authors get shockingly short shrift from reviewers. For instance, in 2012, *The New York Review of Books* reviewed 316 books written by male authors and 89 by female authors. *The London Review of Books*, 203 male authors to 74 female. *The New Republic*, 80 males to 16 females. On and on.

**TH:** Speaking of “on and on,” I don’t know if you saw the recent infographic that looks at “The Diversity Gap in The New York Times Top 10 Bestsellers”? “3 of the 124 authors were people of color”: hapa Japanese **Sylvia Day**, hapa Chilean **E.L. James**, and Chinese American **Tess Gerritsen**.

**NS:** It’s even more egregious than the gender gap. The report looked at the top 10 books for all 52 weeks of 2012. It’s pretty shocking to find only three

writers of color on the list. A campaign similar to the one launched by VIDA, on behalf of women, needs to happen for writers of color. Editorial boards at these publications need to be aware of their inherent biases. Increasing the diversity of their staff (which I would guess is not so diverse) is a good start.



*End Part 1: Part 2 of this interview will be published tomorrow, 1/9/14.*

Click [here](#) to read Terry Hong's feature piece on Nina Schuyler.

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