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An Interview with Paula Young Lee



The title of Paula Young Lee's latest book (her fifth) is [Deer Hunting in Paris](#). The subtitle, which announces it's a memoir (her first), includes two very loaded words, "God" and "Guns." The sub-subtitle explains further: "How a preacher's daughter refuses to get married, travels the world, and learns to shoot." Oh my.

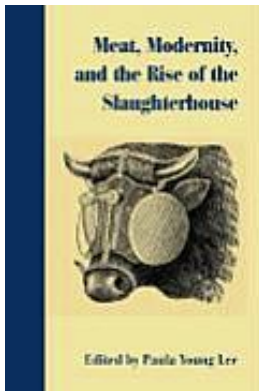
This is surely one book that's definitely been judged by its cover. With "God" and "Guns" providing the first impression, getting the book into stores has not been easy: "Indie bookstores won't carry it," Lee says. Even convincing her local bookstore in Wellesley, Massachusetts -- where she lives part time (the other part, she spends in Maine) -- to stock their shelves took "five tries and multiple visits," she explains.



"The prevailing wisdom says that liberal white women won't buy a book about rural culture, especially one written by an Asian woman. Fair enough. But neither will bookstores that specialize in Asian American authors, including Eastwind (Books of Berkeley) and the AsiaStore at Asia Society (in New York City). Apparently I am not an Asian American author according to their criteria." Ouch. "Not the easiest thing to sell books," she concludes.

For those who get beyond the cover, *Deer Hunting* turns out to be quite winning. Literally. Earlier this year, Lee became the first Korean American woman and only the third minority author in 30 years to win "Best Travel Book Gold" in the 2014

Lowell Thomas Travel Journalism Competition from the Society of American Travel Writers. In spite of certain bookstores' inability to neatly categorize her title, Lee surely won for her memorable combination of snarky humor, self-deprecating candor, and wacky recipes of dubious origin (fifteenth-century "rbbys of Venyson" and "Ham Supper for 227"). She also throws in the occasional untranslated Korean (in *hangul*, no less), just to keep you guessing. That's a certain, unique brand of "insane!" that every Korean is used to hearing regularly on page 251, by the way.



Stuck in the middle of her "genius" older brother and her "pretty" younger sister, Lee grew up in remote towns in rural Maine where she stood out for being one, the preacher's daughter, and two, not white. Her father was a medical miracle, having nearly lost his life -- and legs -- in a car accident that severed his spinal cord, but he defied the doctors' predictions and learned to walk again. He took a year to recover. Her mother was the "problematically beautiful" daughter of a Korean doctor who shepherded the family from town to town, only to be the first in the family to pass away, claimed by cancer. Her body took a year to give up.



Eventually, Lee left rural Maine for prep school, followed by many more years of institutional education that would eventually earn her a doctorate. Grant money gave her the opportunity to live in Paris where, immersed in doctoral research, she couldn't afford shopping at the Bon Marché, but she still ran daily constitutional circles in the Jardin des Plantes, sang "Do-Re-Mi" with a group of local schoolgirls, and took belly-dancing classes. But even though she was "as happy as a clam can be," the City of Lights couldn't hold her and she returned Stateside to be with a man she met online whom she, almost a decade later, still refuses to marry. The two have virtually nothing in common and argue almost always. She's a liberal Asian American who holds little back; he's a white conservative Republican with a gun collection.

Opposites attract, right? Because *Deer Hunting* is ultimately a funny, culturally challenging, expectation-skewering love story, the homophonic "Dear Hunting" could

certainly work here, too.

Here's one of your quotations I found on the web: "[I] started out as an academic historian, migrated into the cultural history of meat via a study of slaughterhouses... and am now mostly a food writer focusing on wild meat." That's *quite* the journey. Care to elaborate?

As a non-linear thinker, I have learned to accept this instead of trying to fit inside boxes. I'm also dyslexic, colorblind, and allergic to everything. Basically, I'm built to nonstandard measures, which includes the fact that I can't buy off-the-rack clothing. Luckily, I'm really good at being stubborn, and I've also learned to trust my gut. When I get curious about a subject, I go spelunking through history, and I'm not afraid to get my hands dirty. My process may make no sense to other people, but it keeps me from getting bored.

You're also an Asian American woman with a gun -- not your everyday stereotype, TV's *Nikita* notwithstanding. Dispel the myths, oh please.

Guns weigh more than you think. They are also not "one size fits all." I happen to be five feet tall with small hands, and most shotguns are sized for a person around five-foot-six or taller. So I shoot a "youth model," which is not ideal because, still, it's not proportioned correctly. But the industry hasn't caught up yet to the rise of female hunters and the fact that many women are petite.

Contrary to popular belief, gun culture is not about being an asshole running around trying to intimidate others by carrying an Uzi, and it is not fundamentally about fetishizing firearms. I say this as a liberal who does not naturally gravitate towards guns, though I do think that women should learn how to handle them. I will also say that a trip to the shooting range does not make me feel badass. But I suspect that is just my personality. My head just doesn't tend to badassery.

If not for your white, Republican, game-hunting partner, John (as well as the rest of his gun-savvy family), would you have become a hunter?

I would have still wanted to become a hunter. I don't know if I would have been able to acquire the necessary skills on my own. At first, I'd gravitated towards a bow, thinking it was "nicer" and more "authentic." I was wrong. Bottom line: you can't just pop into the woods and expect to stumble across your quarry. And even if you do, by the time you get into position and ready to take aim, your motions will have scared it off. It's all about patience and commitment. It's not like the movies. Mostly what it takes is a lot of time. And somebody has to be willing to show you.

And about that white, Republican, hunting family: The relationship depicted in *Deer Hunting* is mostly amiable, and certainly infused with much humor. Did you ever go through that "look who's coming for dinner" surprise or discomfort on either side?

Uh... yup. But I can be annoying. However, their issues with me were mostly about my political views. Not because I'm Korean. If John's conservative parents scowl when liberals talk about "diversity," it's because they'd rather people just go ahead and do it instead of having endless committee meetings and ultimately doing nothing except writing op-eds. John is a generational Yankee, but he's got a bunch of siblings and cousins who've turned the family rainbow. The memoir doesn't get into this because that's their story, not mine. But there are stereotypes to shatter on that count as well.

Have both John's and your extended families met? And?

We've had a few get-togethers. They are always *unpredictable*. Those stories are going into the next memoir, which focuses on the house that John and I bought in Maine, and our attempts to fix it up.

Most important (sort of, *de facto*) in-law family question: Have you eaten kimchi together? And do you make your own? How are your Korean cooking skills overall?

I make kimchi using the bok choy from my garden, but it's mediocre stuff. My sister likes it. But she is also proud of her own kimchi, which to me tastes like plain salty cabbage from a jar. That being said, even my (not)-in-laws agree that "yes, Paula can make a decent pie" -- in Yankee-speak, this is high praise -- and they enjoy my venison version of *bulgogi* [signature Korean marinated beef]. However, John's mother is such an outstanding cook that *Yankee Magazine* ran a story about her, so she sets the culinary bar very high.

***Deer Hunting* is your fifth book and your first memoir. Your previous titles seem more academic (please correct me if I'm misinformed). What made you decide to tell your personal story now?**

Yes, the other titles are mostly academic, and they examine issues that interest a handful of scholars. By contrast, *Deer Hunting in Paris* explores a question that nearly every woman asks in her life: Why am I still single? Many women want to find true love but their mental maps come from fairy tales. Their imaginations keep on getting in the way of their reality. It's the same disconnect that prompts some people to follow their GPS right off a cliff.

Surprisingly, then, this memoir is fundamentally a love story. I find it ironic that unhappily single women

will tell me, with a haughty sniff, "I won't read a book about hunting. That's icky." Uh-huh. Given that so many dating experts talk about men being "hunters" in love, wouldn't it be helpful to know how an actual hunter thinks? As soon as we started dating, John's worldview was so entertaining that I decided to write about our relationship. I approached it in the manner of a scientific cooking experiment with two ingredients -- him and me -- recording what happened when you turned up the heat, turned it down, mixed in a little sugar, added more ingredients, etc. We've been together now for eight years, and we have a fantastic time together, even though we disagree about everything.

Have your father and siblings read the book? What were some of their reactions?

I was really nervous that they'd be insulted, but my father loved it. However, my boyfriend, John, still hasn't read it. He has a rule about reading books by living authors.

Speaking of living, you mention in *Deer* that you don't believe in ghosts, but have no issues with accepting your late mother's visits from beyond. Has your mother come back since the book hit shelves? Has she shared any opinions about her chapters in the book?

Yes, I see dead people. It is very annoying, but I have gotten to the point where I don't have the energy to pretend that it doesn't happen. I have been *waiting* for my mother to check up on me. So far, she hasn't. Which I take as approval of my current state of living in sin. This being said, I have a difficult time reconciling paranormal or psychic abilities with my rational self. The best I can come up with is that we may be fundamentally misunderstanding the nature of our physical universe. But I don't really know. Part of my family line is shaman, so I suppose this ghost business is at least partly genetic.

Paris, France? Paris, Maine? Best and worst of both destinations?

In both places, the best things are the surly people who are really softies underneath. The worst are the drivers, myself included.

Ever miss being a vegetarian?

Not really. I once had a vegan tell me that my food allergies would go away if I went back to veganism. Er, no. However, I am interested in the fact that some vegans think this way.

Have you ever cooked with roadkill?

Yup. If you know what you're doing, roadkill is delicious. Seriously.

Oh. My. Goodness. And what are some of the "seriously delicious" roadkill dishes you've made?

Roadkill raises the specter of class in a big way, which is the Big Unspoken in all of the chatter about food politics in the US Elite, education notwithstanding. My views of the land and its resources are working class, probably because I have seen a lot of the world that doesn't appear on tourist routes. (This is another perk -- or drawback -- of being a nonlinear person. I tend to weeble off the path and end up vaguely lost but in illuminating situations.) To handle salvaged meat requires experience, so I don't recommend it for novices. But I've whipped up crow pâté and served roadkill venison to guests. Don't worry, I warn people before I serve it. But my ingredients come with a provenance, usually some variation of "from the backyard."

What sort of cook are you? I'm guessing not exactly "by the book," given your roadside adventures, but do you follow recipes? Or do you tend to cook by feel and taste?

I cook by smell and feel. It drives John nuts to watch me in the kitchen, but he loves it when I "Iron Chef" a meal using at-hand ingredients. I should clarify that allergies prevent me from consuming most of the dishes I prepare for others. Instead of tasting, I smell.

How enormous is your cookbook collection? You certainly mention *many* (and quite a few that are centuries old!) in *Deer Hunting!* Favorites? Must-haves?

This is going to sound awfully retro, but you can't beat the [Betty Crocker Cookbook](#) for reliability. When I was in my twenties, I was so disdainful of poor, unhip Betty. I had the [Joy of Cooking](#), [Mastering the Art of French Cooking](#)... pretty much all your classics. I gave these books away. Now I use the [The Silver Palate](#) for more complex dishes, and have bunches of single-ingredient cookbooks (one of my favorite is [Eggs](#) by Michel Roux). As for more recent offerings, I really like Anne Bramley's approach in [Eat Feed Autumn Winter](#), and I have to mention Ed Lee's [Smoke & Pickles](#), as well as Hank Shaw's [Duck, Duck, Goose](#). I've just published a cookbook for venison, called [The Hunter's Haunch](#). But I truly enjoy reading weird, old cookbooks. They're a window into domestic life as well as changing social rituals. One of the most entertaining is [The White House Cookbook](#), 1887, which was reissued as a centennial edition. I also get a kick out of church supper cookbooks, firemen's auxiliary cookbooks, and anything that's amateur and local.

Congratulations again on your "Best Travel Book Gold" win in the 2014 Lowell Thomas Travel Journalism Competition. Hope you saw a significant sales spike! What does this mean for your future titles?

It is very nice to win this award, but it's not life changing. It gives me a bit more credibility, that's about it. Also I got a bunch of new followers on Twitter. I'd love to land on the *New York Times* bestseller list, if for no other reason than to get publishers to believe that this kind of book actually *can*. But every writer has that same ambition, so there is a lot of competition.

Talking of future titles, what are you working on currently?

I'm working on a nineteenth-century historical thriller called *The Willing Game*, about a mysterious death that exposes the devious workings of faith, science, and politics at the end of Empire. I'm also writing a contemporary Young Adult series called *The Seven Perfections*, about a bullied girl who inherits a terrifying power. Though unlike in genre, they're both fundamentally about grounding humanity in nature instead of putting too much faith in technology.

And the final toothsome question: What will be on your Thanksgiving table?

Wild venison for sure! There will also be pheasant, homegrown vegetables, a whole lot of pies, plus... Korean food! I always make *mandu* [Korean meat and vegetable dumplings] to start, and kimchi goes well with wild game. No matter what, Thanksgiving dinner is always a feast with many mouths to feed. A full table makes me happy.

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