

## Genius Han Ong *The Outsider American*

By Terry Hong

Han Ong, who made international headlines as one of the MacArthur Foundation's elite Genius Grant recipients of 1997, refers to his second novel, *The Disinherited*, as his "imagined homecoming" to the Philippines. Ong left his native country 20 years ago at age 16, and he has yet to return. He thought he might go back a few years ago, poetically marking 16 years in his native country and 16 years in his new country. But there was that little matter of the passport—he has yet to claim his U.S. citizenship. "Basically, my understanding of the [citizenship] process is that it's cumbersome. And fundamentally, I'm just really lazy," he laughs. "I'm pretty sure that I would be considered American and an outsider if I went back," he adds.

Like Ong, the protagonist of *The Disinherited* is an outsider all around. Roger Caracera is the American black sheep of his prominent Filipino/Spanish family, the youngest child who lacks the ambition and accumulated status of his two older siblings. Shocked to be left half a million dollars by his estranged father, Caracera, a 44-year-old deadbeat as his extended family considers him, decides to stay in the Philippines after his father's funeral in order to give away what he believes is ill-gotten wealth. In his quest to purge his inheritance, he learns that so-called charity is sometimes only in the eyes of the beholder.

**The Bloomsbury Review:** *How did The Disinherited come about?*

**Han Ong:** The first 100 pages were a false start. It turned out I was writing background to the [Roger Caracera] character. The book is about a sleepy man awakened by death—that's the basic thumbnail sketch. And I made discoveries along the way: that he's from a wealthy family, that his father had died, that he disliked his family. Everything converges on this scene where he's going to be given a lot of money, and he's going to refuse it.

**TBR:** *How much of Caracera is based on where you think you might be in 10 years, when you're in your mid-40s?*

**HO:** I hope I'm not anything like him! But part of the writing process is how willing you are to spend time in the company of someone you don't totally identify with. I spent two years with these people, and some of them are definitely not companionable. Writing about them has to be worth overcoming a certain discomfort because the story is compelling and worth being committed to the page.

I was able to spend two years with Roger. I think his criticisms of the Philippines, as well as his realization of the Western exploitation of places like the Philippines, are very valid. He is ultimately very clear about that, and I think that's admirable.

**TBR:** *Now about that question of U.S. citizenship.*

**HO:** I think it's imperative, with the current atmosphere being what it is, to start applying for my U.S. citizenship. So I

will probably begin the process in the upcoming year. With this atmosphere of great fear and the rolling back of civil rights, not being a U.S. citizen automatically makes you vulnerable.

I've never really been emotionally attached to my Filipino citizenship. There's never been any sign of deep attachment or connection to the Philippines for me. It's always been a question of what it means to be an American in the world and if that's a good thing to be for me.

**TBR:** *So do you feel you're American?*

**HO:** I do feel that in a lot of ways, my outlook is American. Hell, some people point out I don't even have an accent [ironic laughter]. I have an American accent is what I think they mean.

I'm Chinese, too, by ancestry. My parents were the first full generation in the Philippines. I take the Chinese part of me for granted. I'm an amalgam. I consider myself as being *from* the Philippines—that was my formative experience growing up. So when I get together with other Filipinos here in New York, being Filipino is the more concrete thing I can actually fall back on in terms of nostalgia, of identification.

**TBR:** *How did the Genius Grant change your life, and how is life different now that the five-year grant is finished?*

**HO:** The grant finished in 2002, so I'm a little poorer now, which is not a good thing. The MacArthur was a nice break from the real world; the real world for a writer is one in which income levels fluctuate wildly so that you don't know from year to year what you might make. The MacArthur eliminated financial worries, so I could write whatever I wanted and be insulated from natural worries. On the other hand, it's blunted my survival skills because I've had no financial worries. My post-MacArthur phase is about getting back those survival skills. And I'm *slowly* doing that. I've been really fortunate to be able to subsist solely on writing, even though the writing income has been mostly from grants and fellowships as opposed to making money off the work itself. But everything feeds into what I love doing.

**TBR:** *When you got the grant, you were better known as a playwright. In fact, you were the youngest playwright ever to be deemed "Genius"-worthy. What prompted the change from theater to literature?*

**HO:** I continue to do little things here and there for theater. But the writing of books is so time-consuming and labor-intensive that for now I am writing novels. My nature is very solitary. My preference is to be in a room by myself doing the work, even when I was in theater. So writing novels is a perfect fit for me. When I did theater, I loved it for a while, but I was always anxiety-ridden. I didn't like watching the reactions of the audience—they would laugh at the wrong time or not react like I thought they would. Maybe I'm just a control freak. But I still have a backlog of unproduced plays anyway. It's not like I can unwrite them. So my future in theater is not wholly cut off.

**TBR:** *And the inevitable question: What might you be working on now?*

**HO:** I just finished a draft of my third book. I can't tell you anything about it; it's too early. By the time it comes out, it might not be the same book. I've talked about projects before, and by the time they are done, what I talked about sounded so much better than the final product, so now I just have to let it be. ■

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