

# Flying Aloft With Chang-rae Lee

## A Conversation

By Terry Hong

Speaking in superlatives about Chang-rae Lee or his work seems somewhat clichéd these days. All three of his novels, *Native Speaker*, *A Gesture Life*, and his latest, *Aloft*, have been so lavishly lauded that coming up with yet another accolade seems nothing less than redundant. Suffice it to say that Lee is surely one of our best writers ever, regardless of age, ethnicity, gender, economic background, or social status. Any way you look at it, the result is the same: He is the real thing.

Lee admits that he was always writing little stories, even as he always wanted to write books. Still, he wasn't quite ready to declare himself a writer to the outside world until after a year of working as an equities analyst at a New York investment bank. Consciously or not, Lee's first career decision seems to have been struck as if in answer to achieving what might be considered the typical immigrant dream.

Born in Seoul, Korea, Lee arrived in the United States in 1968 at age three with his mother and his sister to join Lee's father in Pittsburgh, where the elder Lee was completing his residency in psychiatry. Less than a year later, the family moved to New York City's Upper West Side before eventually settling in the affluent suburbs of Westchester County, north of Manhattan. Like many immigrant Asian Americans, the Lees followed the all-too-familiar search for better and even still better schools for the sake of the children.

As a result, Lee had an extremely privileged education. From Westchester he went to the exclusive Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire and then landed at Yale University, graduating with an English degree, which was fitting with his love of books. When he went to work directly after graduation on Wall Street, ensconced in a financially promising career, he appeared to be the epitome of the immigrant success story.

But one year later, Lee knew he was finally ready to try writing full-time. Ironically, in his current novel, *Aloft*, Lee includes a set of Korean American parents who apologize for their writer son for not having any "real prospects," unlike their other two children, both attorneys. While Lee's own parents were not exactly jubilant about his decision, they remained supportive, unlike the many typical immigrant Asian American parents at whom Lee would later enjoy poking fun.

Once Lee's decision was made, his career moved along swiftly. He left the East Coast for the West, entering a creative writing program at the University of Oregon in Eugene. There, on the other side of the country, he wrote his debut novel, *Native Speaker*, about a young Korean American man, Henry Park, who has just lost both his wife, who left, and his young son, who tragically died. At a crossroads in his life, Henry Park struggles to come to terms with the rigid demands of his immigrant family's past and his current job as a spy for a private intelligence company, assigned to investigate a charismatic Korean American councilman.

Published in 1995 when he was just 29, *Native Speaker* put

Lee on the literary map, earning him lavish praise in addition to the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award for first fiction, the Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers Award, and an American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation. *The New Yorker* heralded him as one of the 20 best young writers under the age of 40.

Four years later came his breathtaking second novel, *A Gesture Life*. The work is a remarkable examination of an ethnically Korean, Japanese American affectionately referred to as Doc Hata by his friends and neighbors in the small New York suburb of Bedley Run where he has spent the latter half of his quiet life. But nothing is as it seems: Set amidst what initially appears to be an idyllic existence in an idyllic setting, the novel slowly reveals Doc Hata's complex relationship with his adopted daughter and the interwoven secrets of his haunted, wrenching past that prevent him from living a full life, leaving room only for gestures.

More awards followed for Lee, as well as further accolades and honors, and *A Gesture Life* was ubiquitously named one of the best books of the year by such publications as *The New York Times*, *Esquire*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Christian Science Monitor*, and *Publishers Weekly*.

Now, five years later, Lee is still under 40 and undoubtedly even more widely recognized as one of the country's best writers. I was lucky to catch up with Lee by phone at his Princeton home in a rare nontravel week: He's been teaching at Princeton University for the last two years. He had just finished crisscrossing the country to promote *Aloft* (as if it needed any help) and was preparing for the European launch of the best-selling title—a surprise departure from his two previous titles, both of which featured Korean American protagonists.

In *Aloft*, Lee's memorable prose runs through the mind, body, and soul of a middle-aged Italian American, Jerry Battle (the family name was conveniently shortened from the original Battaglia). Lee's latest star character is a longtime Long Island native who was once married to a troubled Korean American woman, who is the father of two mixed-race children. When his longtime lover, whom he never married, leaves him in utter frustration, Jerry Battle is forced to realize how distant he is from his own family as he watches his children's lives slowly fall apart and his stubborn father disintegrate with age. It's no wonder that his greatest joy is to fly high above the clouds in a "nifty little Skyhawk" plane named *Donnie* after a young man tragically killed by a drunk driver. And yes, it's with those kinds of details that Lee brings his characters so fully to life.

Like Lee's two previous protagonists, Jerry Battle is a man alone, trying to come to terms with a past that can't be neatly packaged, muddling through a daily life that offers no simple answers, and trying to deal with an uncertain future as he is forced to examine family ties and self-imposed expectations. Regardless of ethnicity, in the end Lee's characters are each an everyman—rather, everyperson—searching for redemption and ultimately hoping for inner peace.

Funny, one of the last times I talked with Lee he was also in the midst of a book tour for the paperback debut of *A Gesture Life* (still certainly one of my all-time favorite titles). He told me

then that while he loved meeting and interacting with his readers, he hated the travel part. “I find it a big drag,” he confessed of all the moving here and there, wishing that he could just “magically appear” from one city to the next. So maybe it’s time to take a lesson or two from Jerry—take the controls and learn to fly. But then, why bother . . . Lee’s soaring already.

**The Bloomsbury Review:** *Let me start with the most basic question: How did you become a writer?*

**Chang-rae Lee:** I don’t know how I became a writer. You have to be more specific.

**TBR:** *How about this? What made you write your first novel?*

**CL:** I had an idea for a story, a particular story. It was the first story that I felt like I should really sit down and write, that I needed to write, that I felt natural writing. I always wanted to write books. I guess all writers want to be writers, and one day they start a book that seems right, and that’s the beginning.

**TBR:** *And so how did *A Gesture Life* come into being?*

**CL:** I started a book that was more directly about comfort women and spent two years on it. But I didn’t like it; it wasn’t working out. The main character of *A Gesture Life*, Doc Hata, was just a small incidental part of that story, but the more I thought about him, the more interested I became in his life. And I thought he would make a much better story. That became *A Gesture Life*, which really focuses on Hata and all the little ins and outs of his consciousness and his memory, which of course include the comfort-women story.

The original story was horrible. It wasn’t badly written, it was just a horrible story. It’s about comfort women, and maybe I just couldn’t make it interesting aside from being horrible and tragic. So I threw it away after two years and started a brand-new book. That’s still a very unhappy story for me. How would you like to work on something for two years and throw it out?

**TBR:** *But look at what it eventually led to! You got *A Gesture Life* out of all that.*

**CL:** But it doesn’t lessen the pain of the realization that not only was it all for naught, but that two years were mostly wasted. That’s hard.

**TBR:** *Well, maybe there’s another book in there . . .*

**CL:** Maybe. There are some other characters in there that I like. I might revisit the book again, but in a very different form. The original pages are still around somewhere, but I’m not resurrecting them anytime soon. It would have to be a different enough book for me to use any of the original material. I wouldn’t want to write *Gesture* or a similar story again.

**TBR:** *In your latest, *Aloft*, why did you choose to create an Italian American, middle-aged protagonist?*

**CL:** I didn’t start out with him specifically. I initially wanted to write about a character in that kind of landscape. My wife’s extended family is partly Italian American, and my father-in-law is from Long Island. So I took the outline of my father-in-law as a character who represents a certain generation in American life, his surroundings, his family. Because I was focused on that generation, that time period, it occurred to me

very quickly that this was not a story about an immigrant—that would be a slightly different book. I wanted a family who had been here quite a long time and a main character who felt comfortable with the idea that he was a longtime citizen of his society. So that naturally becomes somebody who is an earlier immigrant in American history, you might say, since we’re all immigrants at some point. I needed a character whose family had been here long enough that his focus was not on being an immigrant.

**TBR:** *The details of the older people’s lives in *Aloft*—not just Jerry’s, but his father’s, the longtime workers in the family business, etc.—are so vivid throughout the book. How did you get into the minds of these old people to make them so convincing?*

**CL:** It would be a mistake for me to start with the notion that I could think about what older people think about. People are generally the same people throughout their lives, I’m convinced. So I write with that supposition: We’re the same people generally throughout our lives, but with more or less experience depending on our age. That’s partly why I’m attracted to older characters: They have more experience, more time on their side, which means they’ve experienced more happiness, sadness, pleasure, and pain. There’s just more to write about.

**TBR:** *I heard that the character of Paul Pyun, Jerry’s daughter’s writer- fiancé, is your alter ego. Is this true? Are you a foodie like him?*

**CL:** He’s someone I wrote to make fun of myself and to make fun of the image of the “Asian American writer” working out his anxieties. And yeah, I’m a foodie—I like to eat everything. I don’t have any favorites. I like anything that’s different. I’m really ravenous all the time. And growing up with Korean food, I’m used to many strong flavors, so nothing scares me.

**TBR:** *Does this mean you cook like Paul?*

**CL:** Yeah, my wife and I like to cook. We both like to entertain.

**TBR:** *So what’s the latest on the film version of *Aloft*? I understand that the film rights were sold to Warner Brothers and producer Scott Rudin, who has produced such diverse hit films as *The Stepford Wives*, *The Hours*, *Wonder Boys*, and *Clueless*, even before the book was out. Does this mean your other titles might or have already been optioned?*

**CL:** The film version of *Aloft* has been all set up with Warner Brothers. They’ve hired a screenwriter, and things are moving. The studio did such a nice job with Michael Cunningham’s novel *The Hours* and Michael Chabon’s *Wonder Boys* that I felt comfortable giving them the project.

*Gesture Life* is being optioned, too. Tom Cruise’s production company is trying to set it up. They’ve got Ken Watanabe [most recently of *Last Samurai* fame] signed on to play Doc Hata [the book’s Korean American protagonist who the town assumes is Japanese]. Wayne Wang [*Chan Is Missing*, *Dim Sum*, *The Joy Luck Club*] is going to direct, and I wrote the script. With Wayne it’s a more independent film project, so I wanted to do the script.

**TBR:** *How’s the latest book tour been?*

**CL:** It's pretty much over in the United States. Next I'm going to the UK and Amsterdam for the first part of the European tour. In the fall I'll travel to France and Germany, when the book comes out there.

**TBR:** *Have you noticed any differences on tour this time around?*

**CL:** Certainly. The audiences have been larger each time. What's been fine and wonderful is that people know me a little bit now. They don't know me as a person, but they know my work. It's nice to have a body of work that people have read. Conversations now are much more in-depth and interesting. I'm enjoying meeting my readers this time around, more than I did during the book tours for my previous two books.

**TBR:** *Now that you're teaching at Princeton, having left the University of Oregon, have you noticed much of an East Coast/West Coast difference?*

**CL:** I've been here now for two years and haven't noticed that much difference. It's been a good fit for me and my family. Princeton is the least white place we've ever lived. It has a large African American and Latino population. My child's class is more diverse than anywhere else she's lived. There are Asians here, too! We like the town. I think we're here for a while. I like my colleagues, the university treats us well, we're close to New York City. We like it here.

**TBR:** *I have to ask you about the concept of "authentic voice" in writing. On one end of the spectrum, for example, you have Arthur Golden writing as a Japanese geisha, while on the other end there's Kazuo Ishiguro writing as a proper British butler. I think one's an utter failure, one's absolutely not. As a reader, can you question a writer's authenticity when he or she crosses ethnic/racial lines?*

**CL:** If that's where you start in terms of analysis or critique of a book, then I think you're in trouble. Questioning authenticity of voice can be problematic as a measure of literary worth. When evaluating a book by an author who crosses racial lines, you have to start with what you would normally look at in any book: the characters, the language, what happens to the characters. If something doesn't quite fit, if something seems out of place, then maybe you could say that the writer didn't understand a character, didn't understand the culture, etc. All books should be read this way. I don't know how you could read otherwise.

That said, there is a different reaction to the exact same language depending on if the writer has an Asian or non-Asian name. That's just the nature of people's reactions. Assumptions get made about people's names, and that I see as unfair.

I think, over time what lasts and what still speaks to people as authentic is not something in terms of just voice, but all of the other things that encompass and contain everything about that character—only one of which is voice. I'm never bothered when someone writes outside his or her ethnicity.

In my case, I might say that my life is 90 percent white and 10 percent Asian because of the makeup of the society, and because I don't live in an ethnic enclave. Well, maybe more than 10 percent of my life is Asian-based because of my family and the food I eat, but my experience is certainly not just Asian.

If you didn't think that Golden did a good job with his book,

then it's because of the things he did wrong, because of problems with his writing, not just his ethnicity. A book's shell is made up of the representations of ethnicity, but the book's core is always the writing.

**TBR:** *And that ever-unavoidable question about writing: Now that Aloft is out there, can you tell me anything at all about your next book?*

**CL:** Not really. There's not much to tell. It's definitely a story that focuses on characters who had experiences during the Korean War, although it's not set in the Korean War. It takes place much after the war. It has both Korean and American characters. That's about all I can tell you, since I'm just starting. ■

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