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# Poets & Writers

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## SUSAN CHOI

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# Origin

FOR NOVELIST SUSAN CHOI, HISTORY  
HOLDS A FASCINATION THAT CAN LEAD  
TO FICTION WITH A PRESENT-DAY RELEVANCE.

**W**HILE researching and writing her second novel, *American Woman* (HarperCollins, 2003), Susan Choi had the unusual opportunity to sit down to dinner, a couple of times, with one of her characters—or at least with the flesh-and-blood person upon whom one of her characters is based.

The novel, which was a finalist for the 2004 Pulitzer Prize, is set in the mid-1970s, and reimagines the events following the abduction of the newspaper heiress Patty Hearst by members of the revolutionary Symbionese Liberation Army (SLA). Choi chronicles the group's movements in the period after Hearst swore alliance to their radical cause,

BY JESSICA MURPHY • PHOTOGRAPHS BY PIETER VAN HATTEM

focusing on the months after Hearst and two comrades escaped a botched police siege in Los Angeles and began living underground in an upstate New York farmhouse.

Choi's guest for dinner, which was set up through a string of acquaintances, was one of Hearst's admitted kidnappers.

In many ways the meeting was a dream come true. It was an opportunity for Choi to get behind-the-scenes information, what she calls "the hidden, very human, often not newsworthy aspect of something that otherwise is considered very newsworthy." Sitting across from her was a primary source (whom she prefers to leave unnamed), a person who could explain the ideology behind their actions, the fugitives' living arrangements, the psychological consequences of staying indoors, the boredom, the things they did to pass the time, and the "evolutions and devolutions of friendships and personal alliances."

Namely, the close-up, human stuff of compelling fiction.

But having dinner with someone who could answer those questions, who could pull back the curtain, or, as she says, let her "look through the keyhole," turned out to be more complicated than she had originally thought. "I was weirdly caught," she says, "between wanting to make him talk and talk and talk and talk and just hoping he wouldn't say anything." She wanted her source to be able to read the book and say that she'd made it all up.

Ultimately, she decided she couldn't let anything like this happen again. As a writer, she realized there were two conflicting desires at work—she wanted to be true to her source and to the story. Choi is a fiction writer after

all, and naturally she wanted the "coloring inside the lines" to be her own.

Choi is fascinated by events that come to our attention as mere news stories, only to grow so large they become part of the larger cultural narrative, and she is not alone in seeing the potential for great fiction in these tales. There are a number of novelists who have worked with similar material—from Don DeLillo's reconstruction of Lee Harvey Oswald in *Libra* (Viking, 1988) to Joyce Carol Oates's take on Marilyn Monroe in *Blonde* (Ecco, 2000), or her retelling of the famous tragedy on Chappaquiddick Island in *Black Water* (Dutton, 1992), to Gore Vidal's *Lincoln* (Random House, 1984).

For the backdrop of her new novel, *A Person of Interest*, forthcoming from Viking next month, Choi has again looked to recent history. The larger-than-life figure in *A Person of Interest* is a math professor turned mail bomber, hiding out in a cabin in the Northwest, who publishes a manifesto warning of the dangers of modern technology.

But the Unabomber character is not the focus of the novel—in Choi's fiction the larger-than-life figure never is. The "person of interest" here is a tenured math professor, Lee, whose office is adjacent to the one occupied by the bomber's latest victim. The novel begins in the midst of Lee's shock at having felt and survived the "vast fist of the detonation." When reporters approach him, his survival and his eloquent outrage make him newsworthy for a short period of time. But eventually, as investigators learn more about Lee's complicated past, they begin to suspect that he might have been involved.

Lee, Choi says, is in part based on her father, a math professor who went to graduate school at the University of Michigan, where one of his classmates was indeed a man named Theodore Kaczynski. Of this coincidence, Choi couldn't help but ask, "What if?" What if they had been closer? What if their paths had crossed again later in life?

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**JESSICA MURPHY** is a freelance writer based in Seattle. The fiction editor of *Memorious: A Journal of New Verse and Fiction*, she has written profiles of Ali Smith and David Mitchell for *Poets & Writers Magazine*.

CHOI has been considering the possibilities of fiction and storytelling ever since she was a child. Born in South Bend, Indiana, and raised largely in Houston, Texas, where she moved with her mother after her parents divorced, she remembers subscribing to and sending stories to *Cricket* magazine, and even winning first and second prize in two of its story contests—her first publications. She later studied literature at Yale, then pursued an MFA in creative writing along with a PhD in literature at Cornell University. She was on the fence about becoming a writer, but she eventually made up her mind—she never finished the PhD. From Cornell, she took what she considered the inevitable next step; she went to the place that felt like her cen-

ter of gravity, New York City, where she has now lived for more than twelve years.

Soon after moving to the city she continued her education as a writer and a researcher by getting a job as a fact-checker at the *New Yorker*. It was there that she established ties with editor David Remnick, with whom she would go on to coedit an anthology called *Wonderful Town: New York Stories From "The New Yorker"* (Random House, 2001). It was also where she met her husband, Pete Wells, a former fact-checker himself, though during Choi's tenure at the magazine he was working on a freelance basis and was known to her as "that guy who only comes in on Fridays." He is now an editor at the *New York Times*.

Choi now writes and conducts her

research in what she calls an "undisclosed" and "mysterious" location near her home in Brooklyn, though the secrecy is somewhat tongue-in-cheek. It's a shared space that is only a secret to her three-year-old son, Dexter. (For two years she worked in an empty space in her apartment building and she doesn't know if he ever figured out that when she went to work, she was only getting in the elevator and going up two floors.) It will, most likely, soon be a secret to her younger son, Elliot Choi Wells, who was born weeks after we spoke.

Choi is methodical in her approach to writing, and motherhood has made her even more efficient, since she needs to make use of the few hours she has, and because, she says, she can see the dollar bills "fluttering out of my purse" and into the hands of the babysitter. She consistently writes either a thousand words or three hours a day. By keeping to this schedule, she wrote *A Person of Interest* in approximately two years.

AS THE narrative of *A Person of Interest* unfolds, and the investigation of the mail bomber continues, Lee's past slowly unfolds. We learn of his time in graduate school when he was relatively new to the country; we learn of an affair he had with a classmate's wife; we learn of a daughter, from whom he has been largely estranged. But there are things about Lee that Choi never reveals. Specifically, she never tells the reader of Lee's country of origin.

There are clues: We know he has experienced war before, that he has a distaste for Communism, that he'd learned to speak Japanese before he'd learned to speak English. But his actual country of birth is never stated, and from the clues given, there could be any number of possibilities. He could be from any of the Asian countries that experienced upheaval and civil war in the twentieth century, or any of the countries controlled by imperial Japan.

## EXCERPT

**A Person of Interest**

The ambulances arrived first, and then the police and the bomb squad; it was the bomb squad that found Lee, sitting up by that time, with his back to his desk, his legs straight out on the cold tile floor, his gaze riveted forward, but empty. Later he would tell the police he had known, without doubt, that the bomb must have come in the mail. That rhythm, so deeply ingrained in Lee's being: the last mail of the day, the last light stretching shadows across the cold floor, the silence that grew deeper around him as the revelry in Hendley's office began. Loneliness, which Lee possessed in greater measure and finer grade than did his colleagues—of that he was sure—made men more discerning; it made their nerves like antennae that longingly groped in the air. Lee had known that the bomb had come in the mail because he had known that only an attack of mail-related scrupulosity would have kept Hendley in his office with the door shut on a spring day as warm and honey-scented as this day had been; Hendley was a lonely man, too, in his way. Their lonelinesses were different, but Lee saw the link. Hendley loved to be loved; there was never enough to put an end to his restless quest for it. While Lee had taken every impulse of love ever directed at him and destroyed it somehow. Because the neighboring office was quiet, Lee knew that Hendley must be alone; because Hendley was alone, he knew that Hendley was opening mail; because Hendley was opening mail, Lee knew it was that day's mail, freshly arrived. Then the bomb, and Lee's terrible gladness: that something was damaging Hendley, because Hendley made Lee feel even more obsolete and unloved. It had been the gross shock of realizing that he felt glad that had brought him to sitting, from being curled on the floor, and that had nailed his gaze emptily to the opposite wall. He was deep in disgusted reflection on his own pettiness when the bomb squad found him, but, unsurprisingly, they had assumed he was simply in shock.

From *A Person of Interest* by Susan Choi. Copyright © 2008 by Susan Choi. Reprinted by arrangement with Viking, a member of Penguin Group (USA), Inc.

Choi notes that Lee could be from any place fitting these descriptions; he could be from Taiwan, Malaysia, Korea, or elsewhere.

Choi says that the decision to leave out this identifying information was in part an act of rebellion. She didn't want this story sidetracked by the immigrant experience, especially for a character whose country of origin is now the "innermost ring on the tree." His life in America—the fact that he has loved and loved badly—is at the forefront of his identity.

"His life in this country," Choi writes, "and his life in his native country had so few points of coincidence apart from himself—they had none, actually—that when Lee gazed on his past, it could seem as if he'd been young twice. First in his homeland, where his actual youth was spoiled for him prematurely, and then in his adopted United States, where as if in a grand compensation the uncoiling spring of his life had been rewound several times." Lee doesn't necessarily identify as an immigrant, even though everyone else, Choi says, "treats him like a foreign object."

In a similar way, the protagonist of *American Woman*, Jenny Shimada—based on the '70s bomber Wendy Yoshimura, a Japanese American woman from California, called on to help Hearst and her SLA comrades—is often mistakenly thought to be from a foreign country. In one scene, a misguided SLA member, trying to convince Jenny to pick up and fight with them, tells her, "All I'm saying... is your skin is a privilege. Your Third World perspective's a privilege."

To which Jenny responds, "And all I'm saying is, stop saying I'm from the Third World when I'm from California."

Likewise, Choi has sought to avoid the misguided expectations others may have of her writing because of her ethnicity. She has never wanted to be seen only through the Asian American lens, and she bristles when she recalls a Korean American jour-

nalist who questioned her choice of a Japanese American rather than a Korean American character. The daughter of a Korean father and a mother whose parents were Russian Jewish immigrants, Choi realizes that because of her last name she "reads" Korean to most people, but she wants neither to be labeled a Korean American author nor, as someone who grew up in Texas, to be known as a Southern author. She doesn't want to be limited in any way in terms of subject matter, and is thankful she hasn't felt the need either to strategize or to duck trends for the sake of confounding expectations.

Choi did take on the immigrant experience more deliberately and explicitly in her first novel, *The Foreign Student* (HarperFlamingo, 1998), which won the Asian American Literary Award for fiction and was a finalist for Barnes & Noble's Discover Great New Writers Award. It was her first major work, aside from a few published short stories, and she claims to have spent much of her time as a Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center fellow, from 1997 to 1998, recuperating from its completion. There, she spent many days whale watching, and left Cape Cod feeling "whole," with the seed of her second novel intact. Her time there was the beginning of a period of greater recognition: She went on to receive fellowships from both the National Endowment for the Arts and the Guggenheim Foundation.

Choi puts her first novel in a different category than *American Woman*



Choi's characters are complex, fully realized beings with nuanced inner lives.

and *A Person of Interest*. "It wasn't even a writing project," she says of *The Foreign Student*. "It was a life project that turned into a writing project." It was her earliest effort to understand the history of her family, particularly her father's difficult experiences during the Korean War. She was in her early twenties when she began writing seriously, and realized that at her age her father had experienced things that were unimaginable to her. The protagonist, a young man named Chang—nicknamed Chuck by the Americans for whom he works—is based closely on her father, and the plot is modeled on his experiences in South Korea as a translator for the United States Information Service during the Korean

War and his subsequent immigration to the U.S. and education at a university in Sewanee, Tennessee. The story also involves a love affair created out of whole cloth. (“My father,” Choi quips, “is very, very tolerant of the fact that many of the difficult truths that he ends up sharing with me end up then immediately getting fictionalized and are vaguely unrecognizable. And for some reason he’s okay with that.”)

*The Foreign Student* alternates between two narratives, between the late and the early 1950s, between Sewanee and South Korea. Choi’s depiction of the war and its horrors is unnerving and unflinching: the weeks Chang spends hidden in the space beneath the stairwell of his parents’ home, occupied by the Korean People’s Army (“He tried to dream of space,” Choi writes. “He tried to use the utter darkness to imagine a great space around himself, but any way he moved he touched a wall”); MacArthur’s scorched-earth policy; Chang’s experience of torture and starvation, when he ate bark and the lice from his body. Choi gives the reader a close look at both the individual and large-scale struggles and suffering of war.

Her description of the American role in this conflict—largely neglected compared to the Vietnam War—sometimes hits notes of eerie and contemporary resonance. “The Americans,” Chang notes, “went to great lengths to establish that they were not an occupation government at all, but a facilitating presence. A favorite word of theirs was ‘transition.’”

**T**HE world Choi portrays in all of her novels is both violent and highly politicized. In addition to the Korean War, she takes on the Japanese internment camps of World War II, the revolutionary responses in the United States to the Vietnam War, and the individual efforts of a solo terrorist, and she manages to do so without foregrounding a political agenda of her own. Her characters are complex, fully

realized beings with nuanced inner lives, and she entrusts them with their own political views.

When she does find that her own political views are too obvious, she says she works hard to self-correct. While writing *A Person of Interest*, for example, she found that what she calls (not proudly) her “knee-jerk liberal tendencies” to distrust law enforcement made for early drafts full of two-dimensional stereotypes of FBI agents. Ultimately, with revision and research, she created an FBI agent named Jim Morrison who turns out to be one of the novel’s most sympathetic characters.

Choi also researched several people whom the FBI had deemed “of interest,” such as Richard Jewell (the security guard wrongly suspected of the deadly bombing at Atlanta’s Centennial Olympic Park during the 1996 Olympics), Steven Hatfill (the former U.S. Army bioweapons scientist who came under scrutiny in the 2001 anthrax attacks), and Wen Ho Lee (the U.S. nuclear scientist who was the target of a spying investigation), and took particular interest in the FBI’s techniques of psychological intimidation. In Lee’s memoir, *My Country Versus Me: The First-Hand Account by the Los Alamos Scientist Who Was Falsely Accused* (Hyperion, 2002), he mentions being followed by fifteen cars wherever he went, even if he was going fishing. (Choi’s character Lee endures similar treatment.) Her research led to a first draft—entirely overwritten, she says—that had to be pared back and grounded with information gathered during several conversations with FBI agents.

Research, obviously, is a big part of her writing process, and it’s an activity that she says she enjoyed long before she took her job as a *New Yorker* fact-checker. To her, research, combined with writing, helps her feel like a perpetual student, to gather information that becomes grist for the mill. Eventually, she says, her research gives way to the story itself.

Sometimes, however, it can lead

to dead ends. Before she struck up an interest in the Hearst case, before she stumbled on a letter written by Wendy Yoshimura in which she referred to Hearst as “my small friend,” before the unlikely relationship and intimacy expressed in that short phrase took hold of her, Choi had been researching, of all things, piracy on the high seas.

A *Village Voice* reporter once called her a “poetic archeologist.” It’s an apt description, though Choi doesn’t agree entirely: “I don’t feel like I’m digging through many, many strata to uncover the thing that I want to write about, but I always feel as if I’m peeking behind a curtain, which is not archeology so much as voyeurism.”

Whether it’s archeology or voyeurism—or both—the adjective *poetic* stands. There is lyricism on every page, as in the following passage from *A Person of Interest* in which she uses language and setting equally well to illuminate the anxiety of a man who

is suddenly suspected of something he didn’t do.

At home that afternoon, every object seemed to have struck up a position of combat. The lunch meat in his fridge was rancid. He had used up his tea. He stubbed an untrimmed toe on the leg of a dining-room chair, and the yellowed nail tore; he swore from the pain and knocked everything out of his medicine cabinet.... Upstairs in his study—where he hoped to rise above hunger and thirst, above toenail pain...something was terribly wrong with his desk. The same malevolent interference he had sensed in his office also seemed present here. The whole room was so spare, and the desk’s surface so bare, that a stranger might think no attention had ever been paid to the relative sites of the very few objects involved. But to the person who maintained that desk as a Buddhist priest maintains an altar, one slight alteration could have an enormous effect. Lee sat gripping the arms of his chair and bending a furi-

ous gaze on the objects he cherished, as if they’d betrayed him.

Although the events of her new novel take place in the mid-1990s, Choi sees it as a book of the present, and particularly as a book about the post-9/11 world. Readers will find the response to the acts of terror not unfamiliar: The media frenzy, the onslaught of campus grief counselors, and the posters around the school saying *A Normal Day Is Okay* all reek of the public’s responses to today’s atrocities. No matter the year in which her novels are set, Choi’s subject is contemporary America as much as it is America’s past. The result is historical fiction with present-day relevance.

“All fiction to me is about a moment in our human history,” Choi says. “I don’t mean to say that fiction should all be read anthropologically.... I don’t look at it through a scholarly lens, but I can’t help but see all stories as being about the moment they come out of in some way. That’s history to me.” ∞