

PEOPLE
ARE
TALKING
ABOUT

BOOKS

prime suspect

*The improbable hero of Susan Choi's gripping new novel is guilty of many things—
■ except the crime he's been accused of.*

I'm interested in the everyman, someone like you or me subjected to extraordinary pressures that in this day and age don't seem so extraordinary, now that there are all these intrusions into our private lives," says Susan Choi, sitting in her sunlit Brooklyn apartment, her ten-day-old son Elliot cradled in one elbow. "When you're accused of doing something you haven't done, the first impulse is to feel guilt or unease. Anyone under those circumstances would start behaving badly."

Choi's enthralling, ripped-from-the-headlines new novel, **A Person of Interest** (Viking), centers on an Asian-American mathematics professor—"an exotic prince of the Far East, a Yul Brynner with hair"—marooned at a Midwestern university. Following the Unabomber-like mail-bombing of a hotshot young colleague, the prickly, socially tone-deaf Lee,

whose isolation and volatility ignite a plume of suspicion, finds his job in jeopardy and TV vans parked on his lawn. "You're a Person of Interest, and you'll stop being that if you'll stop being so interesting," an FBI agent tells him.

As the thriller-like plot unfolds, it turns out that, though innocent of the crime, Lee is anything but blameless. Not only was he bitterly jealous of the victim, he's avoided by his students, estranged from his daughter, and unloved by his neighbors. And then there's the arrival of a mysterious letter: Seemingly penned by an old rival, it sparks the attention of investigators—and summons regrettable memories of Lee's fragile first wife, Aileen, who appears in flashback as a young mother in what are the novel's most affecting scenes (written shortly after Choi gave birth to her first son, Dexter).



PERSONAL BEST
THE AUTHOR, IN A NAVY SWEATER BY COSTUME NATIONAL, WITH HER SON DEXTER.

Lee's predicament echoes that of Stephen Hatfield and Wen Ho Lee—names that have become shorthand for combustible fear—but it was Choi's father, a Korean-born mathematics professor and former classmate of Ted Kaczynski's, who lent her protagonist his fundamental humanity. "Lee so badly wants to be conventional and in his heart thinks of himself as a good person and a good American. I kept thinking, How would my dad react if he were suddenly an FBI suspect?"

The South Bend, Indiana, native—"there was only one

other Asian kid in my class, Cesar Aquino, so of course it went without saying that we would be betrothed" (in fact, she's married to the *New York Times* dining editor, Pete Wells)—has made a specialty of dramatizing what is missed by the media. Her Pulitzer Prize-nominated previous novel, *American Woman*, was a brilliant take on the Patty Hearst case from the point of view of radical activist Wendy Yoshimura. In tackling a legally meaningless phrase that has become a kind of scarlet letter for our times, Choi, with her almost surgically precise prose, establishes herself as a cultural provocateur à la DeLillo, but with a keen sense of psychological nuance. Capturing the defensiveness of an outsider or the chill of racial profiling (one of the novel's more disturbing revelations is an unofficial FBI policy that certain ethnicities are "immune" to polygraph tests), Choi has the all-too-rare talent of making the political feel unsettlingly personal. "I want to know the kind of details that you'd never see in the newspapers. When we're done with these people, what happens to them?"—MEGAN O'GRADY