

CHANG-RAE LEE AND THE ART OF 'THE REAL' | By Charles L. Terry

When Chang-rae Lee '83 was a student in an English class I taught during his lower year, I made a deal with him. His first paper for the class—a short story—was so promising that he could, I said, ignore the remaining assignments and keep on writing whatever he wanted to write. Lee generously recalled this transaction when he came back to campus three years ago to speak about his career as a novelist. What he chiefly said in his assembly talk, as I remember, was that the words a writer uses should be sturdy, precise and elegant. The text of that speech offered proof that he could practice what he preached.

So too does his astounding new book, *Aloft* (Riverhead Books, 2004). This is his third novel, following *Native Speaker* (1995), which won the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award, and *A Gesture Life* (1999). In all three books, we attend to a remarkable first-person narrator. In *Aloft*, it is Jerry Battle (formerly Battaglia), nearing 60, retired from running the family landscaping business and working part-time as a travel agent. Jerry is a widower, though not without women friends, especially Rita, his “longtime (and recently ex-) girlfriend” and a beloved surrogate mother to his two children, Theresa and Jack.

Jerry's Korean-born wife, Daisy, died mysteriously years before, drowning in the family swimming pool. Jerry has managed to endure that loss, not only because of Rita's love, but also because of his somewhat complicated affections for Theresa, a Stanford Ph.D., and for Jack, who has taken over the family business on eastern Long Island. That business was started years before by Jerry's father, “Pop,” now a resident of Ivy Acres, a nearby nursing home whose many indignities regularly inspire his profane imagination—including his suggestion that Jerry, a recreational pilot, crash his Cessna Skyhawk into one of the Ivy Acres buildings.

Over the course of *Aloft*, we follow Jerry through his ambivalent existence: caring and not caring, enmeshed in family life and hovering above it in his Skyhawk. This theme of being “aloft” works well because Lee does not overdo his metaphor. In fact, the novel is about the opposite of detachment: Jerry

becomes the catalyst for connection among the various Battles.

In the years after Chang-rae Lee graduated from Exeter, I grew to cherish the short fiction of the late

Andre Dubus. If you know “A Father's Story,” you will remember that Dubus brings his first-person narrator, Luke Ripley, to life with an almost unbelievable intimacy. His is the finest voice I know of in contemporary short fiction.

Jerry Battle sustains throughout *Aloft*'s 343 pages the same humanity and earthiness of Dubus' Luke Ripley. But there is more. Just as “A Father's Story” is about a father's love for his daughter, so is Jerry's story about his growing love for his own daughter, and for his other

family members and intimates.

Jerry also evokes the unnamed narrator of Raymond Carver's “Cathedral,” sharing his same breezy vernacular, the same penchant for describing himself as “your truly.” Carver's narrator is never articulate; Dubus' is, and conspicuously so. What they have in common, on the one hand, is their capacity to love and, on the other, their capacity to learn and grow in awareness.

It seems right to mention Lee in the same breath as Dubus and Carver, because he takes similar risks and achieves similarly profound effects, especially with the voice of his narrator. Having spent his working life as a landscaper, Jerry Battle is, like his tough-as-nails father, as familiar with the F-word as he is with a backhoe. Yet his daughter, a college teacher of literature, speaks in the canonized jargon of deconstructionist Roland Barthes. From all these strands, Lee weaves Jerry's improbably rich voice, a voice that is by turns gritty and vernacular, erudite and eloquent. This daring achievement is the heart of Lee's novel, an accomplishment so assured that I can attest to his becoming one of America's great



BARBARA HOBSON

In his latest novel, Aloft, Chang-rae Lee '83 (left) creates a remarkable first-person narrator in Jerry Battle, whose improbably rich voice contains echoes of Dubus and Carver.



novelists. In fact, I think he already is.

But I have told you only half the story, and by “story” I do not mean plot. The other half, as extraordinary in its origins as the aesthetic virtuosity of Jerry’s voice, is what Jerry calls “The Real”—the things that ambush him in life. When Pop goes AWOL from his nursing home and Theresa, her husband-to-be, Paul, and Rita agonize over how to find him, Jerry muses, “Why should this be? Why now? But there’s no answer to that. Just this: here is the Real, all Jerry’s, all mine.”

The Real is the huge theme of *Aloft*. It is Jerry’s gradually developing awareness of his unconditional love for his entire family: AWOL Pop, his dead wife, his son and daughter. His love reaches beyond family to include Rita. The Real ambushes us, the readers, as well: “I will say it is not Pop’s story and in fact probably not even mine, but rather Jack’s and Theresa’s and Paul’s and maybe yours. . . .”

Lee can be aggressive with the second-person pronoun, but it is an aggressive charity for all. This passage comes very near the end of the novel, an ending that is brilliantly subtle in its final disclosure. A fine contemporary writer has observed that great essays and great short stories constitute “major achievements in a minor form.” Chang-rae Lee has given us a major achievement in a major form.

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DAVE DOUGLAS AND THE BORDERS OF FREEDOM | By Ralph Sneed

“It has been said that freedom without limitations is meaningless. This band explores the borders of freedom and bends the rules with compelling logic and passion.”

In the liner notes to his latest CD, *Strange Liberation* (Bluebird, 2004), trumpeter and bandleader Dave Douglas ’81 articulates the impetus and spirit behind this recording, an intellectual statement that enlarges the scope of his artistic vision. Intellectual, yes, but borne out musically by the 11 varied and compelling tracks that comprise his latest studio project. Like



On Strange Liberation, trumpeter Dave Douglas ’81 and his group sweep the listener along on a gust of subtle conversations and diverse compositions.



the best artists who negotiate the terrain of innovation and tradition, form and formlessness, the Grammy-nominated Douglas and his group sweep the listener along on a gust of subtle conversations and diverse compositions beginning with the tentative prelude “Single Sky,” through shades of Monk and Ellington, to understated blues and hints of fusion, the moods of which range from the pensive “Just Say This” or evocative “Mountains From the Train” to the elusively nostalgic “Skeeter-ism.” This group’s unique dynamic is always at the heart of things; the listener is hard-pressed to spot the leader, though it’s Douglas’ 21st recording as one.

According to Douglas, some of the compositions were written specifically for the prolific guitarist Bill Frisell—the featured guest in this sextet. But it’s a dangerous assumption to think that Frisell steals the spotlight here, or that the band is a current upon which the solos of this influential and original guitarist can float imperiously, famously. This is a democratic and utterly collaborative venture from the outset; Frisell’s quirky, snarling and sometimes ethereal voice is as organic to the weave of sound as Douglas’ lush melodies and smart, cascading solos, or Uri Caine’s ironically refreshing Fender Rhodes, which defies the listener’s impulse to categorize it as quaint retro keyboard. Guitarists are no strangers to Douglas’ groups, and Frisell seems made for the adventure—comfortable, clearly having fun and challenged subtly in the generative environment. Frisell fans will find “Rock of Billy” reminiscent of his work with bassist Marc Johnson’s ’80s super group Bass Desires. But ultimately, this is new stuff, and Frisell’s melodic inventiveness is urged on by both Douglas’ and saxophonist Chris Potter’s complementary soloing or melodic harmonizing. Clarence Penn’s unpredictable drum work is both a pulse inside and a torrent around everything. The Miles-esque (*later Miles*) finale, “Catalyst,” is driven by bassist James Genus, who lays down the upright for the funky relentlessness of the throbbing electric, and this is where Douglas, Frisell and Potter really find their edge and grit.

Douglas’ liner notes crackle with political and personal energy, contexts (like September 11) which could diminish the CD’s musical purity. The phrase “Strange Liberation” is derived from a fragment of Martin Luther King’s 1967 speech at Riverside Church about the Vietnam War (“They must see the Americans as strange liberators. . .”). It is a compelling and wittily ambiguous title, which, though it reaches into both artistic and historical realms, also lets the listener and Douglas transcend reference and event to prove that music speaks for itself, is understood on its own terms—not unlike what the image from CD’s cover photograph suggests: an airborne wheel flung free of its axle. Douglas and his bandmates hover over “the boundaries of freedom” with inspiring confidence; any flashes of familiarity or inheritance only spur these rewarding forays into the unknown.

To learn more about Dave Douglas and to hear some of his music, go to <http://www.dave-douglas.com/> ●

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ALUMNI/AE

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Turnaround: Musings on the Earth's Future. Edited by Melissa Waterman. (Published posthumously by Tilbury House Publishers, 2004)

1939—Gilbert Hahn Jr.

The Notebook of a Native Washingtonian. (Hamilton Books, 2004)

1945—James R. Lilley with Jeffrey Lilley.

China Hands: Nine Decades of Adventure, Espionage, and Diplomacy in Asia. (Public Affairs, 2004)

1950—Robert O. Paxton.

The Anatomy of Fascism. (Alfred A. Knopf, 2004)

1958—Robert A.F. Thurman.

Infinite Life: Seven Virtues for Living Well. (Riverhead Books/Penguin Group Inc., 2004)

1965—Charlie Smith.

Women of America: Poems. (W.W. Norton & Company, 2004)

1966—Gilbert Bettman.

First-Time Director: How to Make Your Breakthrough Movie. (Michael Wiese Productions, 2004)

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A World of Art. [rev. 4th edition]. (Pearson/Prentice Hall, 2004)

1967—David J. Taylor and Lana Holstein.

Your Long Erotic Weekend: Four Days of Passion for a Lifetime of Magnificent Sex. (Fair Winds Press, 2004)

1970—Noel T. Boaz with Russell Ciochon.

Dragon Bone Hill: An Ice-Age Saga of Homo Erectus. (Oxford University Press, 2004)

1975—Anthony Weller.

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1981—David D. Douglas.

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1969—Daniel J. Hoffheimer.

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1995—Annie Koh.

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“Diffusion of Local Regulatory Innovations: The San Francisco CEDAW Ordinance and the New York City Human Rights Initiative.” *IN Columbia Law Review*. (v. 104, no. 768, 2004)

FACULTY, EMERITI, FORMER BENNETT FELLOWS

Donald B. Cole. *A Jackson Man: Amos Kendall and the Rise of American Democracy.* (Louisiana State University Press, 2004)

Charlotte Bacon, 1994–95 Bennett Fellow. *There Is Room for You.* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2004).

Aldo J. Baggia. “The Organ Storm of Aloys Mooser: A 19th-Century Swiss Organ Gazetteer.” *IN Diapason.* (95th yr., no. 4, whole no. 1133, April 2004).

Margaret Dietz, 2002–03

Bennett Fellow. “The Interview” [a poem] and review of *Eyeshot*, by Heather McHugh. Both *IN Harvard Review* (no. 26, spring 2004)

L. Todd Hearon.

“Watercourse” [a poem] *IN Literary Imagination* (v. 6, no. 1, spring 2004)

Ilya V. Kaminsky, 1999–2000

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