



Douglas & McIntyre

EXTRAS

JADE PEONY

by Wayson Choy

Jen Sookfong Lee talks about the not-so-simple reason she loves *The Jade Peony*

If I could say one thing about *The Jade Peony*, it would be simply this: it is a beautiful novel. Of course, every simple statement is actually a complicated one in disguise, and the beauty of *The Jade Peony* lies in its multi-layered reach, or its ability to say so much to so many different people. This is a novel that expanded what we thought of as CanLit, pushing it both westward from central Canada to Vancouver, and inward from well-trodden streets like Robson or Yonge to the immigrant neighbourhoods embedded in every Canadian city. This is one of the first novels to give voice to communities that hadn't been heard from yet, communities that may once have thought their stories would never fit into the established Canadian narrative of voyageurs and trading posts, pemmican and poutine. But most importantly, *The Jade Peony* treats its characters with compassion, so much so that as readers we are all convinced that Sekky and Wong Suk and Third Uncle are people we know. They feel what we have all felt. They say what we wish we could have said.

For all these reasons (and maybe one or two others), *The Jade Peony* has lived inside my head since I was sixteen years old. I was, like a lot of teenagers, an aspiring writer. I had read everything I could get my hands on and was well armed, I thought, to write painful romances that were set in otherworldly cities and peopled by strange creatures that were actually stand-ins for death or time or capitalism. I was sure these stories would catapult me to fame, a place that I imagined was filled with black-tie galas, Lincoln Town Cars and funny little drinks that I didn't know the names of yet.

But then, one day, everything changed. I walked into my creative writing class and was handed a copy of a short story called *The Jade Peony* by someone named Wayson Choy. The story, my teacher said, was set in Vancouver, and more specifically in Chinatown. I gaped. Chinatown? I thought. The Chinatown in which I spend every Saturday morning buying oranges and chicken with my mother? Where my uncle hacks off pieces of barbecued pork all day? How could that teeny tiny neighbourhood possibly be interesting enough for a story? Who would care?

I stared at Wayson's name for a long time. I grew up in East Vancouver with other Chinese Canadian kids, and many of the boys carried names just like his. Nelson. Anson. Benson. These were names that sounded prosperous to their parents, the kind of names that they thought rich people in smoking jackets had, names that were inevitably followed by a DDM, LLB or MD. Sitting in class, with my eyes fixed to the name Wayson Choy, I knew, deep in my gut, that this man, this author, was somebody I might have known, whose father might have had his hair cut at my grandfather's barbershop, or whose mother might have run into mine while rooting for bargains at Army and Navy. He might have visited the same herbalist or tapped on the glass of the same fish tank at the seafood store. Wayson Choy could have been a friend, someone as familiar to me as the bus stop on the corner of Main and Hastings.

When I read through *The Jade Peony* that night, I soon realized that it was unlike any other story I had ever read. Throughout the story, I kept seeing words or combinations of words that surprised me, words like Poh-Poh (maternal grandmother) and aiyah (an all-purpose exclamation that can express surprise, dismay, joy or, really, anything) that peppered my life at home but that I almost never saw on a printed page. Wayson referred to Canada as Gold Mountain, wrote about how Chinese people always greeted each other by asking if they'd eaten yet, gave characters names like Old Wong or Monkey King. His characters were the people in my family, the men we chatted with when shopping on Pender Street, even the drunken great-uncles who stumbled through every party my parents ever threw. My head pounded with the connections firing off at every second sentence.

Now, I was a very readerly girl at that age. I had read through almost the entire children's section at my local branch of the Vancouver Public Library and I had started to plough my way through the novels, stories and poems that my older sisters were studying at university. By the age of sixteen, I had read Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro, Margaret Laurence and as much of the various editions of the Norton anthology as I could stand. I had even been through *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan and *China Men* by Maxine Hong Kingston. But as much as I enjoyed those two novels, I still couldn't see myself in them. Both books are set in California and seemed to have been written by aunties I had never met, who sent us photographs of themselves posed beside their powder blue Chryslers with the Golden Gate Bridge as a backdrop. I had never, not once, read a book or story entirely about people just like me.

Reading *The Jade Peony* felt like the living and breathing I was doing every day. I could see the places and people Wayson was describing, from the sidewalks to the old theatres to the produce markets where men in rubber aprons shouted at potential customers walking by. Vancouver is a place that hums along in my blood, and in reading *The Jade Peony* I could tell that it hummed along in Wayson's too.

When I reached the end of that short story, I still wasn't finished with it. For months, even years afterward, the language and characters that peopled the short story, and later the novel, lived inside my head. *The Jade Peony* made me understand that the Chinese Canadian story was worth telling. I had never thought that Vancouver was interesting enough; after all, I was raised on Harriett the Spy's Manhattan and the Yorkshire moors in *The Secret Garden*. What Wayson Choy taught me was that the place I was from, and the people I shared that place with, were what I could write about. My story, if I could write it well, was something others might want to read. My story, even if it featured a character who loved boys she was scared to talk to, or who ate too many salt and vinegar chips, or who drew pictures of herself with her head in flames. Even that story could be something important or magical or funny if I could tell it in the right way.

My journey with *The Jade Peony* has been an intensely personal one, but one that is, strangely, irrevocably linked to the world of readers who have lived and loved this book for their own individual reasons. After all, we all have one thing in common: we all know that *The Jade Peony* is, simply or otherwise, a beautiful novel.

Jen Sookfong Lee is the author of the acclaimed novel, *The End of East*, and is the writing columnist on CBC Radio One's On the Coast. She lives in Vancouver, BC.

D&M book designer, Jessica Sullivan, talks about her experience creating the book cover for the latest edition of *The Jade Peony*

I designed the current cover of *The Jade Peony* in 2005. (Which seems like a long time ago now--I was still in my twenties and I didn't have any children!) I remember Peter Cocking (Art Director, D&M Publishers) and I were both working on fiction covers set in Vancouver's Chinatown in the middle of the twentieth century. We decided to take a different approach to these covers instead of relying on any stock imagery. Given the setting of the novels was just down the street from our office, we took a field trip to Chinatown. We walked around for a couple of hours checking out different shops and streets, waiting for something to catch our eye. I came back with a \$100 dish, a tiny little antique plate on a slight pedestal. I wish I knew what it was for. But it just seemed right, for the tone of the novel, the domestic aspects, and seemed to fit nicely with wording of the title.

I recall Wayson Choy was pretty happy with the redesign and later contacted me directly. As the designer, I never get to actually meet the authors, so it was an unexpected call. We met for ice cream and he had me sign some prints of the cover which he also signed and auctioned off with copies of the book at a charity event. (I recall he was very excited by what he was able to fetch with the packages he had made.) He also presented me with a pendant. He had chosen it because it reminded him of the colours from the dish and cover design. It was really beautiful, and again, very unexpected.

I was so nervous meeting Wayson, and left so speechless by the whole encounter. I was never able to tell him how much I enjoyed his novel. To this day I cringe when I think about that. But I can say it now—I very much enjoyed reading *The Jade Peony* which made it easy to take some extra care with the design. And I very much enjoyed meeting Wayson, who is a very sweet and lovely man. I think of him every time I wear his pendant.

Jessica Sullivan is a senior designer at D&M Publishers.

Wayson Choy offers a playlist that best suits *The Jade Peony*, made up of songs from the time period that the novel covers:

1. **On the Good Ship Lollipop by Shirley Temple** Beloved of 1920s, '30s and '40s Chinatown moviegoers. Part of the fantasy life of many little Chinatown girls.
2. **Mama's Little Baby Loves Short'nin' Bread** Tapdance tune highlighting Chinatown's Lee Sisters.
3. **Home on the Range by Gene Autry** It was a Chinatown boy's fantasy to grow up and be a cowboy and fight bad guys.
4. **Ghost Riders in the Sky by Frankie Laine** Cowboy ghosts — how very like a Chinese folk tale!
5. **A-Tisket, A-Tasket by Ella Fitzgerald** I first played it over and over again at age five, on an abandoned wind-up record player, and learned more English words.
6. Any crash-bang-boom **Cantonese Opera** excerpt introducing the King or the Warrior Prince.
7. **On a Slow Boat to China by Lena Horne** Slow-danced to in my teenage years in dimly lit living rooms of Chinatown.

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A Novel

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604 254 7191, ext 211 · emikom@dmpibooks.com : 416 537 2501, ext 225 · corinae@dmpibooks.com

2323 Quebec Street, Suite 201 : 720 Bathurst Street, Suite 500

Vancouver BC V5T 4S7 : Toronto ON Canada M5S 2R4

WWW.DOUGLAS-MCINTYRE.COM