

# Why are the Children Dying? Mixed-Race Children in Chang-rae Lee's First Five Novels

*By Holly E. Martin*

*"Maybe it's that Mitt wasn't all white or all yellow. I go crazy thinking about it. Don't you? Maybe the world wasn't ready for him."*

---Chang-rae Lee (*Native Speaker* 129)

The contemporary struggle for recognition by mixed-race people began in the wake of the civil rights movement, coming to the forefront in the late 1970s as a protest against US Census Bureau forms that had no checkbox for mixed-race people. The process of identifying oneself racially prior to the 2000 census consisted of choosing a single racial category. People of mixed race who responded were forced to choose one part of their identity over the other. The problem of overlooking people of mixed-race heritage was not limited to the census, however, but also included mandatory affirmative action forms for job applications, classification categories for school children, and, most importantly, the emphasis on choosing a single racial identity added to the difficulty for mixed-race people in developing a group identity. Some who were part white were compelled by society to identify only with the minority part of their racial make-up; some *chose* to identify only with a portion of their racial mix; and others, identifying as mixed, sought to create a mixed racial group identity that would encompass their racial complexity. Since 2000, the US Census Bureau has allowed respondents to check more than one racial category, an indication that US society finally recognized that race and ethnicity are not rigid, mutually-exclusive categories.<sup>1</sup>

In his essay "The Necessity and Impossibility of Being Mixed-Race in Asian American Literature," literary critic Sheng-mei Ma gives a brief history of the development of the mixed-race movement and makes a strong case that the forefront of the current movement "is spearheaded by social scientists in the fields of psychology, sociology, political science, and anthropology" (Ma 176). Contemporary literature, Ma argues, has lagged behind the social sciences in representing mixed-race people in

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<sup>1</sup> For a more complete discussion of the census issue, see Michele Elam's introduction to *The Souls of Mixed Folk: Race, Politics and Aesthetics in the New Millennium* (Stanford UP, 2011), pp. 13-15.

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spite of an increase in literary works since the 1970s either written by mixed-race authors or about mixed-race characters. Works such as *Ceremony* by Leslie Marmon Silko (1986), *A Feather on the Breath of God* by Sigrid Nuñez (1996), *Face* by Aimee E. Liu (1994) and others do explore the nature of mixed-race identity.<sup>2</sup> Such books, however, especially in Asian American literature, are not prevalent, even though writings about Eurasian characters began in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with the Eaton sisters, both of Chinese/British heritage.<sup>3</sup> Ma also asserts that contemporary literary works that include mixed-race characters, especially those by Asian American authors who are not of mixed-race, tend to present mixed-race characters in “cameo appearances” (Ma 186). He specifically mentions two works by Korean-American author Chang-rae Lee, *Native Speaker* and *A Gesture Life*, stating about the mixed-race children in these novels that “*Native Speaker* (1995) has at its core a dead interracial child and his *A Gesture Life* (1999) features an Afro-Korean who vanishes for thirteen years” (Ma 186). The term “cameo appearance” implies that the mixed-race children are not central to Lee’s novels, at least in *Native Speaker* and *A Gesture Life*. However, as Caroline Rody points out in *The Interethnic Imagination*, child characters in a novel, even in brief appearances, carry implications for the future: “Children are potent signifiers in literature, sites of potential and unfolding meaning, of a consciousness at the limit of what the text can articulate” (Rody 156).

On close inspection, one discovers that the mixed-race children in each of Lee’s first five novels constitute an overarching set of symbols, reflecting, at first, society’s intolerance of miscegenation and its resulting mixed offspring, as demonstrated in the dysfunctional behaviors of the parent(s) and the death or disappearance of the mixed-race child. Then, later in the novel, a second mixed-race child’s birth, or its impending birth, signifies an acquired racial awareness on the part of the parent(s) that will lead to a more tolerant and understanding social environment for the mixed-race child.

In all five of Chang-rae Lee’s novels to date, there are dysfunctional parents (or in the case of *On Such a Full Sea* a whole dysfunctional society) that give rise to a mixed-race child. Dysfunctional, in this sense, meaning the parents are unable to hold the family together because of a past trauma and, at least partially, because of racial and cultural conflicts

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<sup>2</sup> See Jeffrey Santa Ana, “Feeling Ancestral: The Emotions of Mixed Race and Memory in Asian American Cultural Productions,” *positions* 16.2 (2008): 457-482. Santa Ana lists a number of contemporary publications about mixed-race people, especially multiracial Asian Americans.

<sup>3</sup> Of the two sisters, Edith Eaton, who wrote under the Chinese name Sui Sin Far, realistically depicted mixed-race characters in her fiction and also wrote journalistic articles about the issues facing mixed-race people. See *Sui Sin Far/Edith Maude Eaton: A Literary Biography* by Annette White-Parks (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1995).

between themselves or between themselves and society. With some exceptions, the mixed-race child usually dies or disappears, or both. Partly because of the death or disappearance of the mixed-race child, the parents resolve their racial and cultural conflicts with each other (or with their child), and in all cases, a second mixed-race child either is a future possibility or is already in existence by the end of the novel.<sup>4</sup> The new mixed-race child indicates the resolution of conflict and, in most cases, the hope for a better future. The assumption is that the new mixed-race child will not die, but on the contrary, will prosper in a supportive environment. The family serves as a microcosm for society, so an increase in tolerance within the family portends a more tolerant society. Such is the basic structure for mixed-race children and their parents in Chang-rae Lee's novels. Variations appear in several of the novels, but the differences are more variations on a theme than completely new takes on the role of the mixed-race child and family.

As Wei Ming Dariotis states in her essay, "Developing a Kin-Aesthetic: *Multiraciality and Kinship in Asian and Native North American Literature*," "people of mixed heritage function as mirrors that reflect back the Other-within-ourselves" (Dariotis 177). In *The Surrendered*, one of the five novels to be discussed in this essay, one of the major characters, Hector, reflects on the mixed-race children he sees in an orphanage at the end of the Korean War. His reflection epitomizes the initial view of mixed-race children as depicted in all of the novels:

At the orphanage there had been a number of mixed-blood kids, a natural consequence of the war. They were sometimes teased or shunned by the others, but to Hector they looked like no one in creation with their wide, petaling eyes and buttery, earthen coloring. Yet despite their beauty and hybrid vigor he couldn't help but see them as being somehow vulnerable, too, doomed to their singularity, their species of one, which mirrored, strangely, how he had always felt inside. (*The Surrendered* 347)

In the above quote Hector, a white man, finds himself identifying with the mixed-race children he sees not because of any racial connections, but because he sees them, and himself, as not having a clear-cut niche within society. For Hector, his Otherness results from the past traumas of war he has endured, but he recognizes a similar Otherness in the mixed-race children. Hector views the children as vulnerable, because

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<sup>4</sup> *The Surrendered* also, in a way, provides a second mixed-race child (actually a young man), but the circumstances of how this young man represents a second child are complex and will be explored later in this article.

they are not readily included in any racial group. However, the children are not vulnerable because of an inherent, essential inferiority coming from being genetically mixed (as was often the case presented in nineteenth and early twentieth-century American writing with so-called “tragic mulatto” characters), but because the world is flawed by an intolerance of difference.

Because of their Otherness, mixed-race characters in literature often die or mysteriously disappear. In *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context*, Elaine H. Kim states, “Given the assumed biological incompatibility of the races, the dilemma of the Eurasian in Anglo-American literature is unresolvable. He must either accept life as it is, with its injustices and inequalities, or he must die. Most of the stories about Eurasians end with the death of the protagonist” (Kim 9). Jonathan Brennan also writes about doomed, mixed-race characters in the introduction of *Mixed Race Literature*, “The prevailing images embedded in American literature of mixed race subjects have demanded a tragic emplotment, a representation of the mixed blood character as morally and physically degenerate and thus leading to a plot structure that insists on the erasure of the mixed race subject” (Brennan 43). Because of the intolerance of society, as manifested in Lee’s novels by the dysfunctional parent(s) in mixed-race relationships, Lee’s mixed-race children *do* die or disappear. However, differing from earlier tropes of mixed-race characters dying, Lee then inverts the stereotype of the tragic, mixed-race character by coming back with a second mixed-race child who is no longer vulnerable but a survivor, and in most cases, a symbol of a potentially positive change within society.

All of Chang-rae Lee’s adult protagonists suffer from a sense of dislocation because of war, discrimination and/or personal trauma: Henry Park, Doc Hata, Jerry Battle, June, Hector and Fan. Their mixed-race children (or boyfriend in the case of Fan) embody the protagonists’ feelings of being Other than the members of their society—outside the experience of *all* of the members of their society, white or minority, even though all of the protagonists are of a single race. The vulnerability of the mixed-race children, as stated earlier, lies not in the children themselves, as they are all described as beautiful and intelligent, but in the dislocation of their parent(s) and the unwillingness of society to readily accept the mixed-race child. The life and death courses of the children reflect their parent(s)’ identity struggles, crises, and their eventual understanding of who they are, signified by the promise of a new mixed-race child. Taken individually or together, Lee’s fictional mixed-race children are not merely “cameo appearances,” but serve as symbolic manifestations showing first society’s intolerance for difference, and then exemplifying

the possibility for change, through families, toward a society comfortable with the mixing of races and cultures.

### Mitt

In Chang-rae Lee's first published novel, *Native Speaker*, the phenomenon of the vulnerable, mixed-race child first appears. The child of a Korean American father, Henry, and a Caucasian American mother, Lelia, Mitt seems to be the perfect mixed-race child of Henry and Lelia's union. As Henry observes Mitt playing with his own, Korean father, he notes the visual combination of races that is Mitt:

In profile, you saw the same blunt line descend the back of their necks, those high, flat ears, but then little else because Lelia—or maybe her father—had endowed Mitt with that other, potent sprawl of limbs, those round, vigilant eyes, the upturned ancestral nose, ...his boy's form already so beautifully jumbled and subversive and historic. No one, I thought, had ever looked like that. (*Native Speaker* 103)

As the title of the novel would indicate, *Native Speaker* uses the metaphor of spoken communication to convey the characters' ease with themselves, their confidence, and their sense of belonging in American society. Although born in the United States, Henry never feels himself to be a legitimate, fully-entitled American citizen. Raised in a Korean American family and speaking Korean at home, Henry's sense of being an outsider to American culture manifests in his manner of speaking. When Lelia first meets Henry, she observes, "You look like someone listening to himself. You pay attention to what you are doing. If I had to guess, you're not a native speaker" (*Native Speaker* 12). Lelia, on the other hand, is from New England, teaches speech classes to immigrants, and readily accepts the role of an English-speaking "standard-bearer" (*Native Speaker* 12). Their differences in their approaches to speaking appear minor, but they reflect further divisions between them that nearly destroy their marriage. Henry, raised with a reticence to discuss his feelings, often retreats into silence. His sense of displacement in American culture is so extreme, it actually leads him to become an undercover spy in order to avoid dealing with who he himself might actually be. As a spy, Henry can make up who he is, a different persona for each new job, and therefore can avoid indefinitely having to define his place in society. His secrecy and stoicism frustrate the outspoken Lelia, who, at first, makes no attempt to understand Henry's cultural differences. As a "standard-bearer" for American English, and by extension, American culture, she expects Henry

to react as she would and to follow her lead. Henry's and Lelia's marriage is on rocky ground from the start, but when Mitt dies, the difference in their need, or lack of need, to communicate becomes overwhelming.

At the age of seven, Mitt dies at his own birthday party. As the kids jump on each other to form a "dog pile," Mitt is caught underneath and suffocates. Although the tragedy is an accident, the symbolism of Mitt crushed to death under a pile of white boys cannot be brushed aside. The boys intend no malice, and no one holds them responsible, but the collective weight of their white bodies crush Mitt without them realizing they have done anything wrong. As a group, as a microcosm of white society, the simple mass of the boys' numbers eliminates the boy who is different—the boy who cannot be racially categorized—silencing him forever. Caroline Rody in *The Interethnic Imagination* points out that Mitt "remains a pure personification of the failed interethnic ideal. ...his death is a cruel inversion, even a demonic apotheosis, of...[a] multicultural human community..." (Rody 85). The boys manifest on a social scale the cultural conflicts that also tear at Henry and Lelia. After Mitt's death, their attempt at cultural mixing seems to have failed, and the differences between Henry and Lelia appear unbridgeable.

The story of Henry and Lelia, however, does not end with Mitt's death. Through a series of encounters, Henry and Lelia draw closer together again and learn to communicate across their cultural divide. Lelia and Henry gradually give up their previously rigid, cultural positions and meet in the middle. Their decision to have another baby indicates the solidness of their relationship.

For the last week now I've been taking the green-colored pills again, honoring our longtime agreement that when she is on the Pill, I will take the fourth week of placebos.... I forget to take a pill one morning and she peppers me with comments.... Then I wonder aloud that perhaps I shouldn't take the pills anymore, and Lelia knows I mean another thing entirely. (*Native Speaker* 284)

Like Mitt, the baby to come will be of mixed heritage, but this time, the novel implies, the baby will not be vulnerable. Henry and Lelia have found a tolerance and strength in their relationship that they did not have before. They can bend with their differences and will create a stable base for their child, who will not be exactly like either of them. Even when Mitt was still alive Henry and Lelia had sensed problems in their relationship based primarily on their cultural differences--including their difficulty in communicating with each other: "the strangeness between us began, the feelings of oddness and misplacement." They argued bitterly about whether or not to have another child. Henry feared having another child

would only be an attempt to fix their problems: “Of course, that’s the worst reason to have a child...because no one can handle being an attempt at something from the very start” (*Native Speaker* 215). But as they come closer together and resolve many of their conflicts, a new baby becomes a welcome prospect. The new child brings with it a symbolic hope that society, too, like their family, will move away from rigid racial categories and that the child will not suffer a sense of displacement because of his or her mixed heritage.

### Jack and Theresa

The title of Chang-rae Lee’s third novel, *Aloft*, reflects the protagonist’s preference to view the earth from the windshield of his private airplane rather than to be mired in the complications of life on the ground. “I bought this plane not for work or travel or the pure wondrous thrill of flight...but for the no doubt seriously unexamined reason of my just having to get out of the house” (*Aloft* 3). Life has been both complicated and heart-breaking for Jerry Battle, as his name indicates. Jerry is a man of Italian-American heritage who should have lived an unruffled life managing his father’s landscaping company and quietly raising his family in the suburbs. But the day he found himself attracted to a Korean woman, whom he married, his life ceased to be simple.

Jerry Battle was first attracted to Daisy because of his fascination with her difference. As his daughter Theresa later claims, Jerry is “hopelessly obsessed with race and difference and can’t help but *privilege* the *normative* and *fetishize* what’s not” (*Aloft* 12). When Jerry explains what attracts him to Daisy, he emphasizes her difference and exhibits what Theresa calls his “Saigon syndrome”: “the fact is I found her desirable precisely because she was put together differently from what I was used to, as it were, totally unlike the wide-hipped Italian or leggy Irish girls or the broad-bottomed Polish chicks from Our Lady of Wherever I was raised on since youth” (*Aloft* 113).

From the beginning of Jerry’s and Daisy’s relationship, the focus was primarily on sex with little attempt at communication. Jerry stereotypes Daisy as the desirable Asian woman, and through years of marriage, he never gets to actually know her. He doesn’t talk to her about any matters of consequence and prefers not to talk to her at all. “Pure talk was never that important to us anyway, even at the beginning, when it was mostly joking and flirting, for though her English was more than passable it was just rudimentary enough for us to stay clear of in-depth and nuanced discussions, which suited me fine” (*Aloft* 125).

Jerry finds expressing feelings difficult, and his distant relationship with Daisy seems, from his point of view, to be an ideal marriage. But,

when Daisy begins to show signs of mental illness, Jerry cannot communicate with her, nor does he want to. He avoids finding real help for Daisy out of embarrassment and an unwillingness to deal with the inconvenient and frightening aspects of life. Jerry thinks that Daisy can just snap out of it. When he does speak to her, he “utters the absolute minimum” (*Aloft* 118). Under such treatment, Daisy fades further away until she commits suicide in the family pool.

Jerry’s and Daisy’s mixed-race children, Jack and Theresa, were seven and six when Daisy died. Even at such a young age, they showed a nervous anxiousness that revealed their awareness of the parents’ deep problems. As with the troubled relationship of Henry and Lelia in *Native Speaker*, the lack of care and communication between Jerry and Daisy is reflected in the personalities of the children, although the children are affected differently. Jack, in his father’s view, seems to have avoided problems regarding his traumatic childhood and mixed-race heritage. Jack seems to have grown up unscathed, mainly, according to his father, because of his physically Anglo features and his ability to pass for white; but on further investigation, Jack has repressed his traumas, including that of witnessing his mother’s death.

Jerry mostly sees Theresa as intelligent, though in his opinion, “overeducated” because of her Ph.D. in literature from Stanford and her tendency to argue with Jerry and to question his attitudes (*Aloft* 12). They often argue about issues of race and white privilege, and she sees through Jerry’s attempts to present himself as a tolerant and accepting person. Nevertheless, Jerry adores her.

Theresa one day shows up on Jerry’s doorstep with her Asian American fiancé, Paul. Theresa is pregnant, and she and Paul have come to stay with Jerry to plan a wedding and to have the baby. But, there is more. Theresa has non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma. Inexplicably to Jerry, Theresa has decided to carry the baby to term, foregoing treatment for her lymphoma, even though her chances for surviving the disease until after the baby is born are slim. Her choice is perhaps based partly on the fact that she was raised in a family where the parents were so caught up in their own problems, the children were barely an afterthought. Now, symbolically, Theresa carries the hidden dysfunction of the family within herself, in the form of a cancer, yet she also carries hope for the future in her unborn child.

Theresa, who has not been eating well, talks her father into flying them to Maine for lunch. The liminal space of the plane, removed from Earth and its problems, provides the environment for some honest discussion. The conversation on the flight home leads into Daisy’s death, and Theresa helps Jerry to see that the death was indeed a suicide. They also discuss Jack and the current failure of the family business that Jack

has driven into bankruptcy. Theresa urges Jerry to invite Jack and his family to move in with him, her and Paul. Although the information Jerry learns from Theresa about Daisy's death and about Jack is more than he cares to deal with, the seriousness of Theresa's illness keeps him from shooting off an angry reply. Instead, Jerry reflects and admits to himself that he knew all along what Theresa has been telling him. He also agrees to talk to Jack.

During the time Theresa lives with her father, she is able to change his attitudes about race and his family. At one point, Jerry had been disturbed over the racially jumbled mix of his family. He quoted his father's racist feelings, but realized he himself felt somewhat the same. His father had said, "How did our family get so damn Oriental? I guess you started it. Even Jack's kids—you'd think with that Nazi [German] wife of his they wouldn't look like such little coolies" (*Aloft* 180). Jerry reflects on this memory, realizing he has also been disturbed by the Asian appearance of his grandchildren. After living with Theresa and her Asian American fiancé, and after living with the imminent possibility of Theresa's death, Jerry re-evaluates his attitudes and with sharp clarity comes to know that his love for his family has no connection with race. As with Lelia in *Native Speaker*, Jerry learns that sometimes reticence can be an indication of deep feeling, not, as might appear, an absence of feeling. He rejects the stereotypes he previously believed:

People say that Asians don't show as much feeling as whites or blacks or Hispanics, and maybe on average that's not completely untrue, but I'll say, too, from my long if narrow experience (and I'm sure zero expertise), that the ones I've known and raised and loved have been each completely a surprise in their emotive characters, confounding me no end. (*Aloft* 248)

Theresa's last act is to secure the cohesion of her extended family. In the liminal, separate space of the plane's cockpit, Theresa and Jerry put many of the painful, family secrets out into the open and resolve to live together and support the family members who need it. The plane runs into some bad weather and the ride becomes bumpy and terrifying. Theresa's water breaks and she goes into labor, way too soon for a normal birth. While Jerry tries to land the plane in a dense fog, Theresa loses consciousness and does not recover.

The landing in the fog stands in sharp contrast to the opening lines of the novel. Mark C. Jerng in "Nowhere in Particular: Perceiving Race, Chang-rae Lee's *Aloft*, and the Question of Asian American Fiction," writes about the opening of the novel, "Jerry's perspective from his plane is situated as exterior and all encompassing. It is a distanced perspective

through which everything looks arranged, orderly, and ‘perfect.’ He is above the fray; he is seeing from the bird’s-eye position. ...free to contemplate social relations without participating in their messiness” (Jerng, “Nowhere in Particular” 195). Jerry’s descent for landing at the end of the novel, during the storm and the fog, enclosed in the cabin with Theresa, signals Jerry’s plunge into the messiness of life. During the flight he has realized the damage he caused his Korean wife by never seeing her or understanding her difference, and he realizes what the life of his half-Korean daughter means to him, just as he loses her.

Theresa’s baby survives, and as in *Native Speaker*, the new baby reflects an opening of tolerance and understanding. As a symbol of his acceptance of the Asian side of his family, Jerry makes plans to put up a tombstone for Daisy (who had been cremated), a memorializing gesture he had not done before. The relationship that has healed here, however, is not that between a man and his wife, but between a man and his mixed-race children and grandchildren. All are living under one roof, signifying their unity and willingness to support each other, just as Theresa envisioned. The new baby, three quarters Asian and one quarter white, epitomizes this newly-formed family.

### Nicholas

Of the five novels Chang-rae Lee has written to date, *The Surrendered* is the darkest. Initially it follows the pattern of two distant, dysfunctional parents who accidentally produce Nicholas, a mixed-race child. The child grows up to graduate from high school, then disappears and eventually dies while still a young man in his twenties. However, at the end of the novel there is no mixed-race second baby or child who holds out the promise of a better, more hopeful future, just a Eurasian con man who briefly pretends to be the dead young Nicholas. The lack of a hope-inspiring second child underscores that the main characters, June and Hector, have been broken beyond any chance of real recovery. Both went through harrowing experiences during the Korean War, surviving while everyone they cared about died. June, as a young child on her own who has witnessed the death of all of her family members, actively chooses survival, and that choice governs her actions for the rest of the novel.

Incidents of war turn June and Hector into shells of humans who have all but lost their humanity. Fittingly, they meet each other on the road, both alone, detached and homeless. Although June is suspicious of Hector, her drive for survival forces her to follow him. Hector is heading toward an orphanage where he has been promised a job, and the starving girl follows along. Hector and June have little to do with each other at the orphanage and lead their separate lives—Hector as a taciturn handyman

whose memories lead him to drink too much, and June, a scrappy young orphan girl whose fits of temper cause the other orphans to fear and despise her.

Neither Hector nor June intends to get close to anyone, but both become attracted to the new reverend's wife, Sylvie. For both of them, Sylvie stirs feelings of love that they thought were long dead within them. Hector becomes drawn to Sylvie right away, and eventually they begin an affair. June desperately hopes that if she proves herself useful enough and kind enough, that the reverend and Sylvie will adopt her. June's affections for Sylvie grow to the point of obsession. However, Sylvie, in spite of the love she engenders in both Hector and June, is not a stabilizing factor in either of their lives. Addicted to opium, and herself a tragic victim of war-time atrocities, Sylvie does not have the strength to heal either Hector or June.

During her life at the orphanage, Sylvie was rarely without a book titled, *A Memory of Solferino*. Her attachment to the book stems from a complicated mix of her memory of her trip to Italy with her parents as a child combined with her memory of their brutal murders, committed by Japanese soldiers, while the family was serving as missionaries in Manchuria. The book symbolizes this irreconcilable combination of the fond remembering of loved ones with the impossibility of love surviving in a brutally violent world. When Sylvie decides to return to the United States with her husband, she gives the book to June as a goodbye present. June knows at that instant that Sylvie is leaving her behind and does not plan on adopting her. As the book indicates, Sylvie's own violent past precludes any ability she might have to extend love. June tries to burn the book the same night, but as the book begins to burn, June pulls it from the fire, badly burning her hands, signifying her inability to let go of Sylvie.

When Sylvie is tragically killed in a fire, set by June in a suicide attempt, Hector, though much older than June, marries her so he can bring her to the United States. They have no intention of maintaining a marriage, and soon after arriving in the United States they divorce and part company. One night, however, during their brief time together, they turn to each other in a desperate attempt to fight off their grief. The result of that one night is June's mixed-race son, Nicholas.

Nicholas starts out as a sensitive child, anxious to please his mother, but even at an early age he shows the ability to emotionally distance himself: "He was a sensitive boy but every once in a while he could exercise a remarkable composure; that perfect distance he could keep, an exquisite self-balance and suspension." June realizes this is a quality he has learned from her own, isolated character. From the time Nicholas is a young boy, June resists nurturing him and whittles away at his self-esteem. When Nicholas shows interest in his Korean heritage, June

attempts to indulge him by taking him to Korean restaurants and grocery stores, but she is unable to hide her own distaste for the food and culture that remind her of the past. Eventually Nicholas comes to view being half Korean as something repellant and comes to hate visiting the Korean shops and restaurants: "Nicholas didn't complain, but on their last time going over he asked if he could stay in the taxi while she shopped and even ate. She told him of course he couldn't and asked him why he would want to do such a thing and he replied, *Because you get so angry when we're there*" (*The Surrendered* 238).

June basically leaves Nicholas to raise himself, having little time for him while running her own business. Even when June becomes aware that Nicholas is stealing, she does not confront him. Once when she observes him stealing, and later sees him casually drop what he has stolen into a trash bin, she actually has a surprising feeling of pride. June's war experiences have made her an unapproachable woman incapable of expressing love and affection, even to her son. The war has also inverted her sense of right and wrong, so instead of punishing her son for stealing, she actually admires his verve, remembering when she had to steal in order to live. She sees his cold detachment from what he has stolen as evidence of his ability to survive.

Upon his high school graduation, Nicholas decides to travel to Europe. Nicholas is gone for years, and June has no means by which to reach him. June develops an incurable stomach cancer, which, like Theresa's cancer in *Aloft*, symbolizes the accumulation of her past traumas. When it is apparent that she is going to die soon, she hires a private detective to locate Nicholas. She discovers that Nicholas has taken on numerous different names and identities while in Europe, indicating that he is, like Henry in *Native Speaker*, trying to avoid his own identity. The detective locates him in Italy, a country that has fascinated Nicholas since childhood because of June's reverence for the book on Solferino, which June brought, burnt and tattered, from Korea.

In spite of her weakened condition and constant pain from the cancer, June decides to go in search of Nicholas. She locates Hector, and after informing him that he has a son, she enlists Hector's help in finding Nicholas. He has no curiosity about his son and no fond feelings for June, but he and June are tied together through their joint past traumas and their loss of Sylvie. Nicholas becomes the initial object of their quest, but they resolve that after they have found Nicholas, they will travel to the church in Solferino. Their plan to go to Solferino is in tribute to Sylvie, indicating their still persistent need to feel close to her.

The quest for Nicholas continues throughout Italy until Hector thinks he has found him. When the young Eurasian man who is posing as Nicholas steals June's money and all of her traveler's checks, Hector

realizes the young man is not Nicholas. Hector, nevertheless, forces the young man to go and see June a second time to return her money, and, more importantly, to pretend to be her son. June needs reconciliation with Nicholas, and though the young Eurasian is not her son, June accepts that he is. She ignores the few doubts she has that the young man may not be her son, and she consciously and fully embraces the belief that he is Nicholas. The young man says he will return to New York, will write her regularly, and kisses her goodbye. June, in turn, promises to keep sending him money. This is enough for June, and the illusion that the young man is her son remains complete. The young man, Hector learns, was a friend of Nicholas, and the real Nicholas died in a hospital from a blood clot after breaking his leg. Without qualm or conscience the young Eurasian, who greatly resembles Nicholas, saw the opportunity to take over Nicholas' identity.

While in the other novels a second mixed-race child signals a hopeful reconciliation and continuance of life, the Nicholas impostor, without even a trace of morality or seemingly human emotion, seems to represent the complete bankruptcy of a soul. The real Nicholas was an effect of war produced by two people who had become broken by their traumas. Despite his damaging upbringing, however, the real Nicholas had shown some feeling, as when he took his mother's book with him on his journey, indicating simultaneously his love for her and the impossibility of showing that love. The pretend Nicholas, whose real name happens to be Nick, is a double for the real Nicholas. In *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance*, Sau-ling Cynthia Wong discusses a particular type of double, the racial shadow, that sheds light on the function of the Nicholas impostor. Wong explains that the racial shadow is a function of projection that "keeps at bay the threatening knowledge of self-hatred. By projecting undesirable 'Asianness' outward onto a double—what I term a *racial shadow*—one renders alien what is, in fact, inalienable, thereby disowning and distancing it" (Wong 78). Nicholas' self-loathing comes from being Eurasian, a quality he can easily project onto the Nicholas impostor, Nick, who is also Eurasian. By doing so, Nicholas psychologically rids himself of the qualities he associates with his mother.

Nick embodies what the real Nicholas hated about himself and what he probably would have become had he lived. The Nicholas impostor says to Hector about the real Nicholas: "He was a pretty good player [con man], really. Maybe a little soft, a little too nice where our marks were concerned, but I was getting him into shape. We were getting to be a fantastic duo, really" (*The Surrendered* 371). There is no "softness" or "nice" qualities in Nicholas' impostor. Nick, as Nicholas' racial shadow, embodies the cold detachment and willingness to do anything to survive

that Nicholas cultivated yet despised in himself; traits he associated with his mother and was able to project onto Nick.

Nicholas' imposter serves as the second mixed-race child in this novel. Although he does not bring a sense of hope for society at the end, as in Lee's other four novels, he does step in momentarily as June's son. As such, he represents not only a warning against the dark outcome of the casualties of war, as embodied in Hector and June's son Nicholas, but also represents June's love for her son. Nick's pretense at being Nicholas invigorates June and makes it possible for her to travel on to Solferino. The imposter makes it possible for June to survive a while longer, and for June, survival is the meaning of her life.

### Sunny

Like June and Hector, Doc Hata in Chang-rae Lee's second novel, *A Gesture Life*, bears the traumatic scars of war. Although ethnically Korean, Hata fights for the Japanese army during World War II. He serves as a medical officer under a brutal commander, Captain Ono, who puts Hata in charge of the camp's Comfort Women. The Comfort Women served as sex slaves for the Japanese soldiers. Most of the women were Korean, considered by the Japanese to be an inferior people, and were either kidnapped and forced into service or were duped into thinking they were going to serve the war effort by working in a factory.<sup>5</sup> Five such young women are brought to Hata's camp, and he forms an attachment with one, Kkutaeh, referred to as K. Christopher Lee in *The Semblance of Identity* suggests that the shortening of Kkutaeh's name to K "can be read as a stand-in for her ethnicity," emphasizing her identity as a colonized, Korean female (Lee, Christopher 112).

The systematic breakdown of Hata's sense of self-worth begins early. He was born to a poor Korean family living in Japan. Despite his supposedly inferior ethnicity, when he proved to have some aptitude in school, a childless Japanese couple took him in at the age of twelve so he could continue his schooling. His parents gave him up to the couple for adoption. Hata was schooled in a military academy, but as a Korean he suffered discrimination from his teachers and fellow students. By the time Hata serves in the military, he is competent in his job but lacks conviction.

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<sup>5</sup> There are many excellent works on the Korean Comfort Women used by the Japanese military during World War II. See especially, *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan* by C. Sarah Soh (U. of Chicago P., 2008). Also, for personal testimonies of Comfort Women, see *Comfort Women Speak: Testimony by Sex Slaves of the Japanese Military*, edited by Sangmie Choi Schellstede (Holmes & Meier, 2000). *Comfort Women Speak* also contains photographic portraits of former Comfort Women taken by Soon Mi Yu.

Captain Ono makes an observation to Hata regarding what he sees as Hata's failing:

"There is the germ of infirmity in you, which infects everything you touch or attempt. Besides all else, how do you think you will ever become a surgeon? A surgeon determines his course and acts. He goes to the point he has determined without any other faith, and commits to an execution. You, Lieutenant, too much depend upon generous fate and gesture. There is no internal possession, no embodiment. Thus you fail in some measure always. You perennially disappoint someone like me." (*A Gesture Life* 266)

Although cruel in his actions and words, Ono pinpoints the growing lack of self-esteem within Hata, the lack that began with the discrimination he faced because of his Korean heritage. Above all, Hata wants to prove himself worthy and to show that he can rise above his lowly origins. Instead, however, his sense of self-worth is permanently shaken when he proves unable to save K.

Captain Ono assigns Hata to watch over K in the medical hut, and through caring for K, Hata falls in love with her. Or at least he thinks he has fallen in love. K allows Hata's feelings for her to develop, as she hopes he will later be willing to help her. Hata, convinced they have a future, makes unrealistic plans for them to marry after the war, completely denying the hopelessness of K's position, and he refuses to do the one thing she asks of him—to kill her. Eventually, soldiers gang rape K in a clearing and dismember her. Ono had told Hata that K was already pregnant when she came to the camp, but Hata had not believed him. As he gathers up K's remains in the clearing, a numbness overcomes him, distancing him from the reality of the scene:

Yet I could not smell or hear or see as I did my medic's work. I could not feel my hands as they gathered, nor could I feel the weight of such remains. And I could not sense that other, tiny, elfin form I eventually discovered, miraculously whole, I could not see the figured legs and feet, the utter, blessed digitation of the hands. Nor could I see the face, the perfected cheek and brow. Its pristine sleep still unbroken, undisturbed. And I could not know what I was doing, or remember any part. (*A Gesture Life* 305)

The death of the fetus signifies the loss of Hata's hope and dream of a future, not only of a future with K, but of any future that has authentic meaning. Christopher Lee in *The Semblance of Identity* attributes Hata's numbness while collecting the remains as an "overbearing self-awareness

[that] finally forces his aesthetic fantasies to collapse so that the shock he feels is nothing other than the force of reality in all its overwhelming immediacy, its inassimilability to narrative form" (Lee, Christopher 111). Hata carries this memory of K's death throughout his life, and the numbness he feels in the clearing stays part of his character. From that moment on, Hata's relationships with others are distant and shallow. He lives a life of gestures, doing what he thinks others expect of him, trying to be a model citizen in his adopted American town of Bedley Run.

Hata attempts to construct the perfect American life in Bedley Run with an efficiently run medical supply business and a beautiful, stately Tudor-style home that he keeps in impeccable order. The only thing he lacks is a family. To fill that hole in his ideal life, he decides to adopt a child. He specifies to the adoption agency that he wants a girl.<sup>6</sup>

Because of Chang-rae Lee's non-chronological method of narrating the novel, the reader only gradually becomes aware that Hata's adoption of a Korean girl is an attempt to make up for his failure to save K. In "Recognizing the Transracial Adoptee: Adoption Life Stories and Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*," Mark C. Jerng delineates the connection between K and Sunny, Hata's adopted daughter: "His adoption of Sunny explicitly repeats his relationship with K, ...He works out his feelings and relationship toward the one in terms of the other and vice-versa" (Jerng, "Transracial Adoptee" 52). Jerng further comments on adoption and its connection with transference, which explains Hata's linking of K and Sunny: "Adoptive relations in this sense are best considered in terms of psychoanalytic notions of transference, which suggest both the invention of others on the basis of our past relationships and the acting out of the past in the present in the form of an unconscious repetition" (Jerng, "Transracial Adoptee" 54). But Sunny is a disappointment to Hata from the start. When he first sees her he realizes she is not wholly Korean, as was K, but a mixed-race child: Korean and African-American. "Her hair, her skin, were there to see, self-evident, and it was obvious how some other color (or colors) ran deep within her. And perhaps it was right from that moment, the very start, that the young girl sensed my hesitance, the blighted hope in my eyes" (*A Gesture Life* 204).

Hata attempts to give Sunny an ideal life and to present themselves as the perfect father and daughter. He buys a piano and has Sunny take lessons, he urges Sunny to practice diligently and to do well with her school studies. What he doesn't do is treat her like a family member, something that is apparent to Sunny from an early age. He even prevents

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<sup>6</sup> For a thorough discussion of the role adoption plays in complicating the relationships in *A Gesture Life*, beyond what is discussed here, see the complete article: Mark C. Jerng, "Recognizing the Transracial Adoptee: Adoption Life Stories and Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*," *MELUS* 31.2 (Summer 2006): 41-67.

her from helping with household chores. As Sunny grows, Hata shows reluctance to discipline her. His girlfriend, Mary Burns (another relationship in Hata's life that he fails to fully embrace), once comments that "it's as if she's a woman to whom you're beholden, which I can't understand. I don't see the reason. You're the one who wanted her. You adopted her. But you act almost guilty, as if she's someone you hurt once, or betrayed, and now you're obliged to do whatever she wishes, which is never good for anyone, much less a child" (*A Gesture Life* 60).

Hata seems to be the opposite in parenting to June. Whereas June ignored Nicholas, Hata is overbearing in his planning of Sunny's life. Yet like June, Hata never comes to know his child. He only speaks to her in ways that admonish her to work harder at her studies and her piano playing—setting an unrealistic goal of perfection. From the start Sunny is an independent and perceptive child, and as a teenager she becomes beautiful, but cold, distant and, like Nicholas in *The Surrendered*, delinquent. She confronts Hata when he questions her about her activities and lets him know that she sees right through his assimilationist façade. In an argument with Hata she retorts, "I don't want love and I don't want your concern. I think it's fake anyway. Maybe you don't know it, but all you care about is your reputation in this snotty, shitty town, and how I might hurt it. ...all I've ever seen is how careful you are with everything. ...You make a whole life out of gestures and politeness" (*A Gesture Life* 94-5). Hata feebly attempts to defend himself, but even he knows there is too much truth in what Sunny says. As Sunny leaves the house to go out and live on her own, she indicates that she is aware that Hata has had some underlying purpose for adopting her. She states, "I never needed you. I don't know why, but you needed me. But it was never the other way" (*A Gesture Life* 96).

After nearly a year, Sunny comes to Hata for help. Sunny is many months pregnant, frightened, and wants Hata to help her obtain an abortion. At her late stage in her pregnancy the abortion has to be illegal, and Hata arranges for it. Unfortunately, his concern for his reputation overrides his concern for his daughter. He later reflects on the moment when she stepped off of the train: "the first thought that came to me was that it was Sunday and quiet, when there was hardly anyone about, and that I ought to spirit her to the private clinic and to Dr. Anastasia as quickly as possible" (*A Gesture Life* 339).

Hata so desperately wants Sunny to have the abortion before anyone else knows of her condition that he bribes the doctor and assists with the abortion himself, secretly, in the clinic after hours. The experience has a lasting effect on Hata as he sees yet another dead fetus, only this time it is the mixed-race fetus of his own adopted daughter. The abortion is the death of a mixed-race, would-be grandchild, manifesting the tragic

conflict within Hata and his severed relationship with Sunny. Again a dead fetus signifies the disappearance of Hata's dream, again an unrealistic dream, and he realizes that he has deluded himself into thinking that he and Sunny could create a model family.

Hata's self-delusions about who he is or should be, his lack of self-esteem, and his readiness to be whomever he thinks others want him to be, shuts him off from discovering his own identity. In turn, he stays shallow in his relationships and brings harm to those who would care about him.

Years after Sunny's abortion, and after she has had a second pregnancy resulting in a son, Hata learns of Sunny's whereabouts and goes to see her. Thirteen years have passed since Hata last saw Sunny. He gets a first glimpse at his grandson, Thomas: "I think the boy must be hers, bestowed as he is with her high, narrowing eyes and her black hair, though it's tightly curled, near-Afro, and her warm, nut-colored skin (though I wonder why he isn't darker)" (*A Gesture Life* 208-9). Instead of wondering about Thomas being too dark, as he did when he first saw Sunny who has the same coloring, Hata wonders why Thomas is not darker. He assumes that Thomas' father is African American. Although still making observations about skin color, Hata shows some progress in his acceptance of racial difference. His attitude this time is not one of disappointment, but of anxious excitement at seeing Sunny and her son.

Thomas is the mixed-race child that brings the hope of reconciliation. Eventually, as Sunny and Thomas become a part of Hata's life, Thomas forces Hata out of his surface, gesture living. Hata's love for Thomas is soon apparent: "I was caught off guard by my own stirring, at least the sudden thrum-thrum in my chest as I shook his small hand goodbye, ...the simple padding touch of his boy's fingers seemed to have the force of a thousand pulling hands" (*A Gesture Life* 219). For Thomas' sake, Hata steps beyond his cautious living pattern and commits his first truly brave act of the novel. He saves Thomas from drowning. Despite being warned by the lifeguards to stay back, Hata swims into the deep part of the lake and dives down to save Thomas. "It's deep out here and I realize that this is where Thomas would be, this is where he would put himself, and when I dive I am absolutely sure I'll see him. And I do: a stocky little figure, crouched as if sitting, his shape hardly discernible. I kick and swoop under him and then lift us upward" (*A Gesture Life* 323). Hata's dive into the deep water for Thomas compares with Jerry Battle landing his plane, with Theresa aboard, into the fog. Both men, prompted by love for a child, voluntarily give up their delusions of a seemingly perfect family and face the complicated relationships in their lives.

Hata's love for Sunny and Thomas leads him to realize that he needs to confront the ghosts of his past in order to maintain an

unburdened relationship with his family. He knows he cannot do this soul-searching task while maintaining the material buffers he has constructed for himself in the town of Bedley Run, or even in the presence of Sunny and Thomas. He therefore sells his house and makes plans to travel to the locations where the traumas and the loss of his self began. He will not be looking for destiny, fate or forgiveness, he claims, but only for himself. Some readers find the ending disappointing, wondering why Hata would leave his family now that he actually has one. However, he does seem to intend to return once he has accomplished his quest. He senses he will never completely put behind him the tragedies of the war and the debilitating discrimination he suffered, but he can come close enough. The book ends with "I will circle round and arrive again. Come almost home" (*A Gesture Life* 356). These last lines indicate that he will someday rejoin Sunny and Thomas, ready, as much as is possible given his past, to be a father and grandfather.

## Reg

As in the case of Nicholas in *The Surrendered*, Reg in Lee's futuristic novel *On Such a Full Sea* serves as the object of a quest. Reg, the boyfriend of the female protagonist, Fan, mysteriously disappears from the settlement of B-Mor without any apparent reason and with no explanation from the authorities. After Reg's disappearance, Fan embarks on a dangerous journey outside the boundaries of B-Mor to find her lover. B-Mor (formerly Baltimore) is a service community, a labor-based settlement, tasked with growing organic vegetables and raising other "pure" food for the neighboring, wealthier Charter districts. The futuristic world of the novel is organized into numerous elite Charter districts, the labor communities that serve the Charter districts (and in turn receive their protection), and the lawless "outer counties" that lie beyond the protective walls. In the distant past, to utilize the abandoned city of Baltimore, B-Mor was created by transporting, en-masse, the population of an area of China that had been rendered unlivable by pollution. The first immigrants, known in B-Mor as the "originals," were thus all ethnically Chinese. Almost all of the previous inhabitants of B-Mor left or were driven out, leaving a homogenous Chinese population. However, there were a few people who survived on the outskirts of B-Mor, believed to be the inhabitants who lived in Baltimore before the arrival of the originals. Reg, although mostly of Chinese heritage, carries on the bloodline of these earlier inhabitants:

The lines of his family, the Xi-Jang clan, go back right to the beginning of B-Mor, the Jangs among the originals who landed in

the destitute city that very first hour. After the initial period of strife with the handful of remaining inhabitants finally died down, one of the Jang boys fell in love with a girl from one of the holdout native families, surname Willis, and married her, producing several children. There's no record of further mixing for the Jangs, just an extensive linking during those early years with the Xi clan..., but there are inevitable jokes and snickerings about certain undiluted features that show up in every generation of the clan, like Reg's amazing head of Afro-type hair, which clearly derive from that Willis girl. (*On Such a Full Sea* 66)

Reg's mixed bloodline allows him to avoid some of the inbred characteristics of most B-Mor residents, including a propensity for cancer diseases. Before he disappears, the medical authorities of B-Mor find that Reg is "C-free." In a world where inhabitants can be genetically tested for every potential disease, not showing a genetic indicator for developing some kind of cancer disease is virtually unheard of. But, this cancer-resistant genetic trait does not benefit Reg in the long run. By the end of the novel, the reader and the legend-telling inhabitants of B-Mor realize that it was probably this cancer-resistant trait that caused Reg to be abducted from his home. Most likely, he is living in a medical lab somewhere, undergoing life-long testing to see just how his cancer-resistant genes operate as he ages.

When Fan's brother, chosen to live in the Charters at a young age because of his intellectual brilliance, discovers Reg's history, instead of helping Fan find him, he plots to get his hands on Reg himself: "regardless he'd want Reg in his hands, for sure...to determine what in his makeup was leading people to believe he was C-free forever, although how, without his whole life having been lived and studied, could you ever be certain? Maybe you'd have to keep him forever" (*On Such a Full Sea* 327). Despite Reg's genetic superiority, the society does not readily have a place for a mixed-race young man. Reg does not die, at least according to the legend, but he is kept in captivity and prevented from leading a normal, fulfilling life—even to the limited extent that is allowed in the highly controlled labor settlement of B-Mor.

The disappearance of Reg, and Fan's astonishing and daring journey outside the protective gates of B-Mor to find him, becomes a source of legend for the inhabitants of B-Mor. The point of view in the novel is from one of these inhabitants in the settlement, who speaks to the reader on behalf of the community, explaining how the legend developed and what the impact of Fan's actions and Reg's disappearance have had on the community. As a resident of B-Mor who has never left its protective walls, the narrator and other members of the community can

only speculate on Fan's adventures, and thus the experiences they attribute to Fan take on a surreal and symbolic dimension that reinforces their romantic notions of love and the fearful dangers of the world outside of B-Mor. The disappearance of Reg also leads them to question the motivations of the authorities, and ultimately, to protest their regimented lives confined to B-Mor where they lack any means, with a few exceptions for especially brilliant or talented residents, by which they can better their circumstances.

The rising awareness of the residents of B-Mor that they should not be so complacent in their lives and perhaps can improve their circumstances by questioning authorities and protesting, is the legacy of the legend they have created about Reg and Fan. People begin to question their purpose in life and the trade-offs for their protected living conditions. Although these questions and the social changes that occur are met with some trepidation, the legend of Fan and Reg brings forth the impulse to demand a better life. Most importantly, the residents seek to redefine themselves and their roles in society: "We have lashed ourselves together, we are cheek by jowl but now in an entirely different way, yet we can't help but murmur the question that is surfacing in all our eyes: so who are we now?" (*On Such a Full Sea* 309).

The novel ends with Reg, probably, living out his life in a medical lab, and Fan, escaping a betrayal by her brother, on the run in the outer counties. Fan's brother noticed Fan's developing pregnancy, a result of Fan's last night with Reg before his disappearance, and sought to use her for his own advantage to bargain a lucrative business deal. Fan escapes with the help of her sister-in-law and a friend. She will go into hiding to protect the baby from a life of medical testing. The ending appears unsettled, ambiguous, but though Fan's and Reg's personal circumstances appear bleak, the legend of Fan and Reg has set change in motion, and the future of a healthy and free humanity depends on Fan and the hope of her mixed-race, and possibly "C-free," baby.

## Conclusion

Looking only at the dysfunction of parents; the deaths of their mixed-race children; the reconciliations; and the hope-filled, new, mixed-race babies, one might think that Chang-rae Lee is writing the same book time and again. Obviously, as is clear from the discussions of each of the five novels, this is not the case. Lee does, however, utilize a pattern of parents and mixed-race children in each book, and he employs this pattern as a metaphor for depicting the lives and trials of mixed-race couples and their offspring.

In all of the novels, even in *The Surrendered*, the solidity of the family relationship takes precedence at the end. In *The Surrendered* the family that comes briefly together is not real, but the second Nicholas (Nick), although an impostor, brings June a moment of reconciliation that she needs to continue on with Hector to Solferino. Together they make a poor substitute for a family, but perhaps for people as deadened by war as June and Hector, such make-shift, family-like relationships have to be enough.

Not all mixed-race children of dysfunctional mixed-race couples die in Chang-rae Lee's books, but the frequent death of mixed-race children does create a powerful symbol for the legacy of destruction such dysfunctional parents leave in their wakes. The outlook is not hopeless, however, for reconciliations and understandings happen and are literally born out in the hopeful symbol of the "new" baby. The new baby will come into a family that through its experiences has become much more hospitable to the mixed-race baby's needs, and the parents, who have overcome their own problems with racial identity, can shift their attention to assuring the solidity of their families. The families, however, are not the stereotypical families of two same-race parents, or even of two parents, and the children, as one character states, look like a "goddamn UNICEF poster" (*Native Speaker* 123). These are, however, the families that Lee celebrates. The ends of the novels are generally optimistic, though cautiously so, implying that a solid and nurturing family, no matter how diverse the members, may eventually lead to a solid and nurturing society.

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