

An Unfinished Conversation: An Interview with Yiyun Li

By Noelle Brada-Williams

Yiyun Li has written five books, including two books of short stories: *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers* (2005), *Gold Boy, Emerald Girl* (2010); two novels: *The Vagrants* (2009), and *Kinder Than Solitude* (2014); and her new work of nonfiction, *Dear Friend, from My Life I Write to You in Your Life* (2017). Born in Beijing in 1972, she came to the United States in 1996 to pursue graduate study in immunology at the University of Iowa where she originally took up creative writing in an adult-education class. By 2000, she would decide to leave immunology with a Masters degree and to pursue writing instead. She would go on to receive an MFA in Nonfiction writing and another MFA in fiction from the Iowa Writer's Workshop. Thus, she has followed in the path of writers such as Joseph Conrad, Vladimir Nabokov, and Ha Jin in arriving from outside English to become masters of narrative in English. Yet Li herself has asserted that English could be said to be her first language in writing as she only began to write creatively in English. By 2004, Li had published in *The New Yorker* and *The Paris Review* and earned a two-book contract from Random House. She also won the Pushcart Prize and the Plimpton Prize for New Writers. Her short story collection, *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers* was published in 2005 and Li went on to win the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award, the PEN/Hemingway Award, *The Guardian* First Book Award, and the California Book Award for first fiction. By 2007, Director Wayne Wang had made two films out of the short stories in her debut collection that are set in America: *The Princess of Nebraska* and *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers*; the latter of which was adapted for the screen by Li herself.

After her second book, Li garnered one of the famed MacArthur "Genius" awards in 2010. She was also named by *Granta* one of the Best Young American Novelists, and by *The New Yorker* as one of the top 20 writers under 40. Her short stories and novels have focused on a range of characters who have experienced the great changes of the last sixty years of Chinese history. In many of her stories the radical historical changes occurring just outside the deteriorating walls of one apartment complex, or the newly gentrified walls of another, are dwarfed by the powerful emotions that maintain human loyalties, desires, and fears despite the passage of time. Some of the stories detail the ways that a simple passing acquaintance can reshape our whole lives, while in contrast, the lifelong bonds of family and community can dwindle into nothing. She explores

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the geographies of privilege and hardship that are mapped across modern China and the Chinese diaspora.

This year Yiyun Li published her first book-length work of nonfiction. Her memoir, *Dear Friend, From My Life I Write to You in Your Life*, is aptly named since it reads like a memoir of her life as a reader. She writes how the theft of her books “exposed the illusion in which my life was lived”: “To lose the books—*my copies*—was to lose the conversations. And conversations are my evidence of time...unlike human lives and feelings, they are not written in vanishing ink” (132-133). The book takes us from her home in the United States, back to the China of her memories, to a small town in Ireland, a London Hotel, a psychiatric hospital, and wherever else she can delve into a book. It explores both the realities of mental illness and the intensity with which readers connect to the written word. This interview was begun via an email correspondence just after she moved to the East Coast of the United States to join the Creative Writing faculty at Princeton University.

AALDP: I had the opportunity to teach both of your short story collections, *A Thousand Years of Good Prayers* and *Gold Boy, Emerald Girl* in a class on film and literature. Do you ever think about how your work is used in classrooms? Do you think the process of turning literature into “required reading” has an impact on the literature or the reader’s connection to the text?

Yiyun Li: I have never actively imagined my work taught in a classroom. In fact, I don’t imagine my work being read. That doesn’t mean I don’t want it to be read, but to think of a reader, even an abstract one, seems to me a distraction. My attention should be directed toward the characters, and once they are fully alive they will go out to interact with the readers, and I prefer to be entirely absent in that interaction.

Like you, I also teach and every time I put down that phrase “required reading” I wonder to myself: required for what? I wonder if teaching literature is in a way to answer that question: required for seeing what was not seen before, required for ridding oneself of any illusion and falsity, or perhaps required for living?

AALDP: For “seeing what was not seen before” — I may need to write that on my syllabi next to the required texts. That phrase pretty much defines defamiliarization which is what the Russian Formalists argued distinguishes literary from nonliterary language. What was it like to adapt your story “A Thousand Years of Good Prayers” into a screenplay? Have

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you thought about doing this with either of your novels? Can a novel be captured in a feature-length film?

YL: I was a non-visual writer to the extreme. I can feel my characters more than I can see them, and I can sense their reactions to the world they live in more than I can visualize the world. I wasn't sure if the story could be adapted into a film at first, which I explained to Wayne Wang. The story is internal, and not much happens externally. In adapting the story, I felt I had to learn to see with a different pair of eyes. Even the simplest question of when a dialogue or a scene happens--is it daytime, or night time—seems more of a concrete thing in a script than in a story.

I have not thought of adopting my novels for the same reason that I don't feel the urge to visualize the books unless I have to. I remember my characters' thoughts and feelings more than the events in my novels. One imagines a novel will lose something when being adapted into a film. To me it's the fluidity and the timelessness of the interior landscape of the characters' minds, as film is defined by physicality and time.

AALDP: Do you know the Bechdel Test, the test for women's presence in narrative: at least two women talk to each other about something other than men? I hear it is even being used in Sweden as a kind of film rating system! I have always admired your work because your narratives so often focus on the intensity of relationships between women, even unrelated women such as Susu or Granny and "The Proprietress" in her eponymous story or between retired women professors and younger women in the stories which bookend your second short story collection: "Kindness" and "Gold Boy, Emerald Girl." Is an abstract concept like "sisterhood" possible or is that just an "inanity" as Mrs. Jin refers to the reporter's comments in "The Proprietress?"

YL: I didn't know the Bechdel Test! How fascinating! An abstract concept—there are many floating around these days, or perhaps always—doesn't feel as though it helps my thinking or writing. I imagine in real life, fewer of us live by concepts. (Some do, I have no doubt, but they are not my characters and I don't find them interesting.) For instance, we don't tell ourselves: in making friends with that person we're forming sisterhood; or, in doing that, I become a rebel against my own culture. A label is a gesture to diminish the complex and the unspeakable of human nature.

AALDP: Has shifting to nonfiction with your new memoir, *Dear Friend, From My Life I Write to You in Your Life*, changed how you write?

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YL: Writing nonfiction, especially this book, is against everything I do in fiction: you can't dissect a character because in doing so you leave a dead body in a book, but in the memoir, I have to treat myself as an object of dissection. I think after the book I feel the need to be more precise, and also more charitable yet more ruthless. But these are a bit vague. Coming back to writing fiction, I don't feel my way of approaching stories and characters has changed.

AALDP: As a longtime teacher of creative writing, do you ever find your work in the classroom or with your students shaping your own approach to writing?

YL: Sometimes I wonder if the things I say in the classroom can be put together into a little book of how to write fiction, but then the thought makes me laugh: it would be a book that constantly contradicts itself and sets rules and then disregards them as useless. I don't think teaching has changed my writing or shaped it much. Each student is different, so is each story. In the end, I seem to be separating teaching and writing: when one teaches, one should be able to find a way to explain things; when one writes, one is drawn to the inexplicable.