

Trusting in Narrative: An Interview with Susan Choi

By Noelle Brada-Williams, Transcription by Sabrina Lim

Susan Choi is the author of five novels, including *The Foreign Student* (1998), which won the Asian American Literary Award, *American Woman* (2003), *A Person of Interest* (2008), *My Education* (2013), and *Trust Exercise* (2019), which won the National Book Award. She has also collaborated on a picture book, *Camp Tiger* (2019). She teaches at Yale University. On February 21, 2021, Susan Choi read from her short story, "Flashlight" (*The New Yorker*, September 7, 2021) as a guest of the Center for Literary Arts at San Jose State University. She was introduced by Dr. Selena Anderson, the Director of the CLA. After her reading, she was interviewed by Noelle Brada-Williams and took questions from the audience. Due to the pandemic, the entire event was conducted virtually on Crowdcast, and Susan Choi joined in from her home in Brooklyn.

AALDP: My first question comes out of your novel, but it's just as applicable for your short story as well. *Trust Exercise* makes us question the trust we place in fiction when we willingly "suspend disbelief," and I was wondering what kind of trust *should* readers place in literature? Is there a role for poetic justice or principles like Chekhov's Gun? Or should we be more wary of the authority of the author? What should be the ethics of readership?

Susan Choi: Wow, that's a great question and a big question. I'm going to seize on "should we be wary of literature, should we be wary of the author?" And the ethical question behind it. I think that, on the one hand, literature is an art form that, when I try to make it, I always hope will bring something good, something good to the reader of enjoyment, pleasure, thought, some kind of new experience. I always want my reader to trust me. I don't want to destroy that trust. With the book *Trust Exercise*, I was really concerned to take the reader on an experience that would include doubt and surprise, and that would be disruptive in certain ways, but that ultimately, I hoped, wouldn't be a violation of their trust but would lead them to feel as if they'd been in good hands in some way. And so that's what I want literature to do, but at the same time, I think it is a really interesting place in which to explore ideas of authority and ideas of narrative—and how narrative structures our lives, not just our reading lives as people who like books, but actually our whole lives. Our lives are structured by stories—stories that are told to us, or stories that we tell ourselves. We make sense of the world through narrative and often damage can be done in this way, and damage is done this way, through the narratives that are told to us, or that

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we tell, or that we uphold. All sorts of narratives. I could think of a million different examples of stories that are made up that do enormous damage; the story of race is just one that's a big one. So, I think as much as literature, to me, is about all good things that I mentioned, I also think that it is really an interesting place in which to examine storytelling in general and the role it plays.

AALDP: You mentioned how powerful storytelling is and how much authority it has in our lives, and I think nowhere more than in the historical narrative—who controls the telling of what happened in the past—and I was thinking about how much your novels are so notable for how many major historical events you've tackled: like the Korean War, the kidnapping of Patty Hearst, the Unabomber, and now with *Trust Exercises* it might be said the Me Too movement —although you've been tackling issues of statutory rape and sexual exploitation and things like that since your first novel in 1998 — and my question is how do you decide what is a topic for a Susan Choi book? Do you start with an historical event, or with an issue or conflict that the event allows you to explore?

SC: Yeah, that's such a great question, and it sort of suggests that I plan ahead, or that I have more control over my own process than I do. I wish that I could sort of sit down and decide like *this will be my next book* and premeditate it and plan it out and write it and publish it, and it was all that tidy, but it's really not. I've heard writers say, "oh, I didn't choose my subject, the subject chooses me," and it always sounds a little cliched, but there's some truth in it too because the books that I've written have been written because the subject matter, something about the story, just seized my interest in a way that I couldn't really let it go. So it wasn't that I went out and sought it so much as something hooked me. Often, it's something really small. It's not the issue, but usually like some little human moment. My novel *American Woman*, which is the one that was inspired by the Patty Hearst kidnapping and by radicalism in the 70s in general was really sparked by a nonfiction book I was reading about the Patty Hearst kidnapping in which her arrest was described. At the time of her arrest, she was living in hiding in San Francisco, living in plain sight, really. "In hiding," but sort of in plain sight, wearing a lot of sunglasses in San Francisco with this housemate and friend of hers who was another radical, who was also wanted by the FBI. They were just kind of two girlfriends sharing an apartment at this point. They would garden. They wore floppy hats, maybe to hide their identities, maybe just to not get a sunburn, and they were just hanging out, and one day, the FBI, having figured out that this was actually Patricia Hearst and Wendy Yoshimura, broke their door down while they were sitting in the kitchen together. And that idea of two female friends—regardless of the fact that they had done what they had done and were notorious in the way that they were—the two of them sitting in the kitchen together just being together, and suddenly the door smashed in—it just kind of

grabbed my heart, and I just wanted to write the book that led to that moment. It was that simple. I thought *I have to write a book that has this scene in it.*

AALDP: That's great. I really admire your attention to detail and depicting the specificity of even recent historical moments such as the 1980s world as part of *Trust Exercise*, or the 1990s as most of *A Person of Interest*. There are just little details like there's a kid sitting in Doctor Lee's class that's listening to in *Person of Interest*, headphones and a tape deck, and I'm like, "oh, that's 1990s for sure," or just little details, like noting that his birthday is 1930, and he's in his 60s. Yet you do this in these novels that so often go back and forth across whole decades and multiple time periods. So, I wanted to turn to actually another kind of paradox I found in your work, which is that they seem to have a really strong sense of place even though they usually involve a lot of travel—like a lot of long car drives or transoceanic flights. I'm wondering what techniques do you use to ground your characters in a specific time and place like a California suburb or an upstate New York woodland?

SC: Yeah, I love that question. And actually, it makes me want to admit that there's so much long-distance car travel in the drafts of my books that end up getting cut out because it's a really huge weakness of mine. But I love writing about people driving. It's like you just can't have characters spend all their time driving; it's not that interesting, but I do love space and places, and I thank you for mentioning it. I guess because it's always sort of been something that I had to have in order to get going on a project, was this really strong physical sense of where people are. I'm really unable to write anything unless I kind of know down to like floor, walls, and ceilings what sort of space people are in. I'm not really sure why that is, but it's just kind of the way I guess my imagination works. And upstate New York or wherever it is exactly that the characters in *American Woman* are in hiding, I think it is upstate New York, I've forgotten now, but what was really important to me that I had to figure out was like, what does the house look like where they were in hiding? I just had to know exactly what kind of house it was, and it's funny we're talking about *American Woman* a lot, which was my second book that came out a while ago. I tried to write that book a million times and couldn't ever start it until I actually set foot in a house in upstate New York that turned into the house where the Jenny character is hiding. I took a house tour and thought, "oh, this is where my character is," like she kind of had never been anchored until I saw that house, and then I was able to start writing. So, I just think it's a thing I need, and it ends up playing a big role.

AALDP: I can't remember, but I think it might be where Mark Gaither in *A Person of Interest* wanted to bury his father in upstate New York, but I can't remember if that's where it was.

SC: Yeah, he goes for a hike that again was a hike that I sent him on, this character, because it was a hike that I've been on that was just a really special place. So again, I often seem to need to put my characters in specific physical places in order to kind of figure out what's up with them, I guess. I talk about place and setting a lot with my students when I'm teaching writing. I just find it really crucial.

AALDP: I certainly really enjoyed it. I mean, it's because in the midst of a novel about all these other things going on, you get these such honed in moments with the natural world. I almost feel like I've gone for a hike myself.

SC: Oh, that's great! I'm glad.

AALDP: I've only ever taught your novel *The Foreign Student* partly because it appears in Srikanth and Iwanaga's *Bold Words: A Century of Asian American Writing*, and I teach a lot of Asian American lit, so that anthology works great for a class in Asian American lit. I was wondering, how do you feel about your work being a subject for academic study, and also what kind of classes would you prefer to see your novels appearing in?

SC: Actually, I find it incredibly flattering. I'm kind of a lifelong student and somebody who is still feeling a little abashed that she never finished her doctorate in English because instead she wandered away and wrote a novel. I'm happy about the outcome, but there is a wannabe English professor living inside of me, and so when my books are taught, it's really gratifying to me because it's kind of like I got into the Academy through the backdoor even though I never wrote that dissertation. I don't have any preference about what sort of class my book would be taught in, and in fact, I think that's just really the amazing and gratifying thing about writing—something that then kind of goes out into the world and has this life that you don't have any control over. It's thrilling to open a journal article and find that a book of mine is discussed. I think that the more unexpected the associations or the more unexpected (by me) the context of the course that my book would be taught, the more exciting that is for me. It's really true that I think that the thing about literature that's so interesting is that, when you write something, you're really giving this set of instructions to a reader like, "I hope that you understand things in *this* manner, and I sort of hope that you feel things in *that* matter," but I actually don't really know what is going to happen in your mind and in your thoughts when you read this. And so what's really exciting is the unexpected ways in which readers receive writing and interpret it. So yeah, I'm always thrilled that my books are taught in any context.

AALDP: So my last question, and then I'm going to turn it over to the audience: One of your first awards that your novels earned was actually the Asian American Literary Award for *The Foreign Student*, and yet your latest novel, *Trust Exercise*, doesn't seem to really include any Asian Americans, or even much of a focus on race outside the socio-

economic conditions of one of the Latinx students at the performing arts high school. And I am wondering, do you find the *presumption* that your work will tackle issues of race limiting?

SC: I do, yeah. I mean I think that on the one hand I find it limiting because it does suggest a certain limited view of people to say, of a character of color for example, their identity as being of color must be the primary factor in their consciousness. It is sort of denying for example a person of color the right or the ability to just be a human in the way that they want to be human. That said, I do think that race, gender, and so many aspects of our identities are kind of embedded and central to our experiences, and so are so many other things. All of my books have kind of approached this a little bit differently. I think of *A Person of Interest*, which is a book that's really about race, and at the same time, it was a book in which I sort of made this very stubborn decision not to identify the nation of origin of the character Professor Lee. He's a foreign born American. I just decided that I wasn't going to give him a nation of origin except to say that he is foreign born because I was sort of stubbornly resisting the impulse of others to look at Lee and see his otherness first—to look at him and go, “oh, this person is not one of us. This person is not from here. That's the primary characteristic. That's the main thing that defines his humanity, is that he's not one of us.” And I just thought that Professor Lee doesn't want to be seen that way. He doesn't see himself that way, and the fact that he was born on foreign shores and is a naturalized U.S. citizen is not the first thing in his consciousness. The fact that he's marked in that way as an “other” by people who look at him made me sort of perversely think, “well I'm not going to tell you.” I think it was my response to the lifelong question, “where are you from? No, where are you *really* from?” Professor Lee just won't tell, and neither would I. So, I think I do find it limiting to come back to your first question. And at the same time, it's always there, right? Maybe that's two ways of saying the same thing. It's always there, and in some of my work it will be foregrounded, and in other works of mine other things will be foregrounded.

AALDP: Well, certainly naming him Lee was inspired, making him possibly from anywhere.

SC: Yeah, it does! It was very carefully chosen for that reason. It does place him potentially in a number of places.

AALDP: For sure. Now we're going to turn to the audience's questions. The first one is from Jessica Mejia, who is one of our teaching associates. She asked, “Hi Susan! I was wondering if you could talk about the metafictional aspects of *Trust Exercise*, and how you played with theater exercises in your novel's form.”

SC: Thanks, Jessica. That's a great question—or two. The metafictional aspect of *Trust Exercise* is something that really happened almost accidentally. I spent some time with students earlier today telling that story, and I know a lot of them are here, so I don't want to go through the whole story again except to say that *Trust Exercise* began for me as a narrative that I thought was conventional. It's third person omniscient storytelling about some characters, and for complicated reasons having to do with those aspects of I guess our shared storytelling lives that I referred to at the beginning of our conversation—our political storytelling, our storytelling as a nation, the way we conceive ourselves. Because of thoughts on that track, *Trust Exercise* took this different turn unexpectedly. I don't know that I could ever plan to write a book that would sort of be metafictional and would explore these issues. I just don't know how I'd do it. I think that idea is so abstract that I think I would probably write something pretty terrible, but this book wandered into those questions kind of on its own and ended up surprisingly being this vehicle for exploring who has the authority to tell a story, and who speaks for who. So that was an exciting discovery for me. The theater exercises were so much fun to write about because some of the acting exercises were ones that I had been exposed to in more benign form in acting classes. I was roughly familiar with acting exercises of a certain kind and then much much much later reading Lawrence Wright's amazing study of Scientology called *Going Clear*, I have found that Scientology incorporates all of these sorts of rituals that, when I read about them, they rang a bell. I thought, "wait a minute they sound just like Sanford Meisner acting techniques, and they are. Actually, L. Ron Hubbard actually sourced a lot of Scientology practice straight out of Meisner technique. There's a lot of overlap between Scientology and Hollywood as we know, and the overlap arises in all sorts of ways. The fact that those acting exercises had actually been kind of repurposed in that context made me really fascinated to explore sort of other potential dark uses of them.

AALDP: All of the sudden, I'm just realizing, all these actors that got into Scientology, and then their careers took off...they just got extra training!

SC: Yeah, maybe in part! I mean there are definitely things about the way Scientology works that would feel familiar to those who had studied in a certain way.

AALDP: So, the next question is, "what's your writing process like? Where and when do you feel most inspired to write?"

SC: Yeah, that's a great question too—one that has a lot of different answers. I think my writing process is always changing is one sort of challenge. You know, ten years ago, I might have answered that question in a totally different way. Now, I can feel my process changing, and I'm not even sure where it will end up. I think a lot of my

process right now is sort of focused on trying to just focus on process instead of on results. *Trust Exercise* was a great lesson because it evolved really almost accidentally out of writing that I was doing really just for fun, and just for myself, and just to get a break from another project that I was really concentrating on so hard that I just made it terrible. So, I think part of my process now is just trying to be more playful, write in an undirected sort of freeform way, be more exploratory, and not constantly flogging myself to write another chapter today. Sometimes, I think, "I'm just going to try writing. Maybe, no one will ever see it," but I've discovered that my work is more interesting to me sometimes when it's just open ended. In terms of inspiration, this is something I tell my students until they're just sick of hearing it, but I'm always scolding them not to wait for inspiration before they sit down at their desk or wherever they write with their laptop, or their notebook, or whatever they use—that they just have to sit down and write. It's the writing that will make the idea come, and not the idea that will make the writing come. I try to take that advice myself as often as I can.

AALDP: That's excellent advice. Kelly asks, "how do you find the right metaphor, broadly defined?"

SC: The right metaphor broadly defined. I'm not sure how broadly I'd define it. I think the only times that I seek a metaphor are pretty limited times. I guess when I'm actually trying to describe something. Honestly, if it doesn't occur to me pretty quickly, I usually try to abandon the cause of metaphorical description because I find that metaphors that occur organically are sometimes pretty good. And metaphors that are sort of the result of strenuous laborious thinking about how to make a metaphor, in my case, are often not great. So sometimes I just think like, if there's no metaphor occurring to me here, let's just not have one.

AALDP: Someone has a question about "Flashlight." They said, "in your fascinating short story 'Flashlight,' you mentioned that Louisa would gaze into elaborate miniature homes 'mesmerized, with the peculiar sensation of leaving her body and slipping in among those were wonderful things.'" It's almost an existential experience. Could you speak to that? It reminds me of Cortazar's story, 'Axolotl.'"

SC: Gosh, that's so great! I love that story. It's a fantastic story, and I just want to thank the asker of the question. I'm very tickled. Yeah, it is an existential moment, but in all honesty, *it is* a moment that just occurred totally organically because I loved miniatures when I was a little girl, just loved them. I still have kind of a thing for little things, and so it was very easy for me to occupy Louisa in that moment and remember what it was like to sort of imagine yourself in this tiny world. The larger metaphorical implications didn't occur to me, but I think writing works well in that abstract step. It doesn't really occur to you, but it occurs to the reader.

AALDP: Here's a question about *Trust Exercise*, "when did *Trust Exercise* reveal itself to you? Meaning, when did you know it would be this novel about truth, perspective, and trust? The second part of the novel surprised me and made the postmodern scholar in me jump with joy." That's from Alexis.

SC: Oh, I'm so glad you jumped with joy and weren't one of the readers who hurled the book across the room when you got to that part, which also happened. You know that's kind of when actually I had been, again I ask forgiveness of the audience members who heard this story already, but I had been writing the material that ends up being part one of the book for quite a long time just for fun and had never imagined making the material part of a book that would behave the way this book does. When part two kind of happened to me—and it really did sort of *happen* to me—around these issues of storytelling and authority and who gets to speak for us, very specifically it was September 2016. I was really shocked and horrified by this person in public life who seemed to be deciding to speak for the United States and thinking surely this person isn't going to end up speaking for the United States, and yes, that did happen, but at that time just in that weird way that for my writing, I'm working on over long periods of time and not thinking actively about, turns out to be in my mind, without my realizing it, I thought, "I wonder if any of the characters in that high school feel this anger at having their story told wrong? Feel this rage that someone is relating a story that they're part of, but relating it in a way that they consider to be false?" As soon as I asked myself that question, I had an answer. I had this very marginal character who had cropped up in that material, and I thought, "I bet she's mad." I just suddenly thought, "I bet that girl Karen is really mad." It was before the name Karen had taken on its strange cultural resonance that it has now. It's just that my Karen was this extremely marginal character, and I thought, "I bet she's mad because she is marginal." Like, "What right did I have to make her marginal? Why isn't she the star of the show?" And so, Karen's voice sprang up. I started writing in Karen's voice, and that was really when the book appeared to me as a book where I thought like "actually, this material about the teenagers and this monologue of Karen's, these are both parts of the same thing." And I was surprised, and thought, "I have no idea how to end this."

AALDP: I think that makes it so much richer. My colleague, Alan Soldofsky, writes, "can you talk about how ambiguity functions in your writing? It seems a central element in a number of your books and stories. Professor Lee is a great example of an ambiguous character."

SC: Ambiguity is something I like, I'm afraid. I find ambiguity really interesting. I think that I am alert to ambiguity in the world, so it often does turn up in my writing. Again, it's not something that I ever set out to create. I think that's becoming the

theme of my answers is that I just never really premeditate these kind of abstract ideas. I never think, “I want to write something that is ambiguous.” I don't even know how I would do that, but that condition of ambiguity does end up being a big part of a lot of stuff that I write, and I don't really know how to explain it except to say that I find it an interesting condition to explore in a lot of different contexts.

AALDP: Our colleague Jess asks, when you read your story “Flashlight,” she said, “you are such an amazing reader. Do you have any tips for writers about to step up to an open mic?”

SC: An open mic? I have like never had the courage to do an open mic!

AALDP: Well, maybe open zoom.

SC: Yeah, I guess, stepping up to the podium, I do have advice, actually. My first piece of advice would be: don't have that relaxing drink before you're reading. Have it afterwards. On my very first book tour for *The Foreign Student*, I actually almost fainted at a bookstore in San Francisco because I had accepted the offer of a relaxing glass of wine before my reading. I should not have done that, so that's my first piece of advice. My second piece of advice is—and this is really nitty gritty. I find that the writing that often, to me, when I'm writing it, feels most writerly and literary, and I'm excited about it, and it's ruminative, or it has big ideas or nice descriptions, I find often that this writing does not work as a reading. I've consistently found that, at least for me, writing with dialogue works much better to read aloud. I don't know why, but I enjoy reading dialogue out loud. It's fun. I like the voices. I like hearing it. In my own career reading out loud from my books, I've consistently found that whenever I'm looking for something to read, if I choose something with dialogue, it just goes better, and so that would be my second piece of advice.

AALDP: That's good advice. I know a lot of people would read aloud novels in the 18th and 19th centuries, so I often find that, when I would read to my son, I would often choose older works because they seem to be assuming that they would be read aloud in some ways. It's kind of interesting thinking about. Some people in the chat have mentioned that ambiguity is a big part of modern art, and I wonder if, in our postmodern era, we're so used to ambiguity that it may be harder to read aloud some of the complexity of some of the novels.

SC: Yeah, don't get me wrong. I also like certainty. I like them both!

AALDP: In your craft talk, someone asked about resolution near the end. I kind of wanted to come back to that because Kimberlé Crenshaw has this series that she does with the African American Policy Forum called *Under the Blacklight*. She's been bringing

together all kinds of different writers and thinkers to talk about issues of race and issues of art—*The Story of Us* is what she called it—with Viet Thanh Nguyen and Bryan Stevenson, and I'm trying to remember everyone. One was a Frederick Douglass scholar, and they were basically talking about—

SC: Was it David Blight?

AALDP: Yes, yes! And they were talking about these kinds of iconic or even stereotypical figures that keep showing up in literature and film in America like “the white savior.” Viet Thanh Nguyen talked about “passive Asian in the background.” But one of the things that David Blight suggested—they were thinking about an Ignoble Awards—was one for “the most resolute” or “the resolution ending” because we always want resolution. And I can see how that's very difficult when you're writing about cultural issues and conflict, but on the other hand, I do appreciate what you said about looking for resolution or for certainty because that is kind of why we turn to art rather than just real life.

SC: I agree, and I do feel that there has to be some sort of resolution offered, but not necessarily that tidy resolution where everything turned out okay. These sort of falsely uplifting endings that can kind of make us all feel better about things that actually aren't better. Sometimes, resolution is, as I said, like the withholding of that very resolution, but at least, there has to be something decisive, I think.

AALDP: I think the ending of your *A Person of Interest* is one of my favorite book endings just because it feels very real, but also very—I don't know—sweet in a way.

SC: Thank you! I like that ending too, but then I also became suspicious of my own desire to end books with a parent-child reunion. Too much resolution!