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THE WRITING LIFE

Belle Yang

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Belle Yang is "an American writer who writes in English and thinks in Chinese," Amy Tan once said. It's as if, reading Yang, English readers are miraculously handed the ability to understand the language. But shuttling between Chinese and American heads is not as easy as it sounds. Yang won that gift through fierce experience.

She was born in Taiwan 47 years ago and came to the United States with her family when she was 7. Her father was a struggling artist. Her mother cleaned rooms in San Francisco's Fairmont Hotel. An only child, she graduated in biology from the Univ. of California, Santa Cruz, determined to support her parents with a doctor's salary. Instead, she followed her father's footsteps and enrolled in art school. And then, as in a fast cut from a Hitchcock movie, she found herself running for her life.

Yang was being stalked by a spurned boyfriend. He broke into her house in rural California and made off with "a truckload of things" -- among them, her father's much prized scrolls and paintings. The man hounded her, threatened her physically. Eventually, her parents decided to send her to China, where they were certain she would be safe.

For a while, she was. Belle lived in Beijing with her father's friends and visited her grandparents in the countryside. But history soon overtook tranquility. She was in Tiananmen Square with her artist friends when the 1989 massacre of students began. "I'd imagined myself in China forever," she says, but heartbroken and terrified, she found herself on the run again.

Back in America, tormented by nightmares about Tiananmen and renewed harassment from her old boyfriend, she decided to fight back. She wrote letters to lawyers, briefs for detectives, pleas to judges. "That's how my writing began," she says. "I quickly found out that talking evaporates - writing has the power to make things happen." After a few years, he was finally apprehended. And a writer was born.

Yang has since produced two volumes of a Chinese trilogy: *Baba: A Return to China Upon My Father's Shoulders* (1994) and *The Odyssey of a Manchurian* (1996). The third volume will be a graphic novel. She has also written two children's books: *Chili-Chili-Chin-Chin* (1999) and *Hannah is My Name* (2004). (A third, *Always Come Home to Me*, will be released next month.)

This summer, "My Name is Belle," a documentary on her life and work will appear on public television, and, from July 16 through December, an exhibit of her work will go on display at the American Immigration Law Center in Washington, D.C.

You might wonder how a writer and painter could inhabit the same person. Until you realize that in China all poets paint. "In Belle Yang we have our Isaac Bashevis Singer and Marc Chagall," Maxine Hong Kingston once said. A two-fisted warrior artist.

-- Marie Arana