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## Immigrant writer comes in from the cold at last

Melinda Harper

Up-and-coming author Min Jin Lee describes herself as 'thoroughly an immigrant' and this is one of the themes of her debut novel *Free Food for Millionaires*, which has been described by Publishers Weekly as 'noteworthy' and is a New York Times editors' choice and a national best-seller.

'I think this will always be a part of who I am,' said the Korean-born writer who lives in Tokyo with her husband and son. 'I like it. I enjoy the flexibility of my identity.'

Lee sees the world as 'large and varied', but does not believe we are all that different. 'We want our basic needs met and we struggle with our metaphysical aspirations. This is comforting, too. Nevertheless, as for acceptance, I don't think that anyone is ever completely accepted.'

Acceptance has not come easy for the 40-year-old author, who has experienced being an immigrant, having moved to the United States at the age of seven, and has struggled for more than a decade to get her first novel published.

'I quit being a corporate lawyer in 1995 to write fiction. In 1996 I wrote a novel and sent the manuscript to a group of fancy publishers in New York. They all said no thanks,' she explained.

Undeterred by her first rejection, she continued with her writing and produced two more manuscripts, both of which she failed to complete. In 2001 she began to write *Free Food for Millionaires*, which she finished in 2006.

'It was my fourth novel attempt. And that is where the horror ends, however. I finished the book in May 2006, found a terrific agent in June and sold it in July at a small auction. It's a happy story, but it took 11 years,' she said.

For first-time writers with a manuscript in hand, she has this advice: 'I think the standard approach is to query agents to see if they are interested in representing your work. I think it is difficult to publish in most publishing houses without a good literary agent.'

Another tip is for new writers to check the acknowledgment pages in the books they admire or that resemble their manuscript.

'You can find models of query letters in many publishing books and on the internet,' she said.

Lee also had a message of hope for wannabe novelists. 'I hope you can remain encouraged. For me, that was very tough because it took such a long time for me to write and I had many rejections,' she said.

She expresses her gratitude on her website for having made it in the literary world. 'I feel profoundly fortunate that I have been able to finish this book and get it published. It took 12 years for my first novel's publication, but it could have been longer. It could easily have been never, and waiting and working can teach you a lot about chance - especially in a city where I am surrounded by many talented writers.'

Getting back to the immigrant theme of her book, Lee said it seemed that acceptance of whoever is 'other' can only come in degrees. 'I think we are all trying to accept, but I think most people have some fear of whatever or whoever is alien to them. I guess I believe that narrative and writing have some of the power to explain our alienation from each other.'

Her book's heroine Casey Han mirrors her own life in some ways. 'I intentionally gave Casey my height, education and my childhood street. It was privately amusing to give her these external attributes, but she is far more interesting and energetic than I am. My personal life is very quiet. I got married at 24, practised law and had a child at 29. I've been married for 15 years and I have never smoked a cigarette.'

Lee's new novel *Pachinko* is about a young ethnic Korean man living in Tokyo, where his father owns many pachinko (Japanese pinball machine) stores.

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'I have been curious about the ethnic Korean population in Japan and their history since college. For me, fiction usually starts with a personal question or actual event; then I try to see the people and how they behave under their circumstances,' she said.

Lee will talk about her novel *Free Food for Millionaires* and the art of writing over lunch with Dania Shawwa Abuali at M at the Fringe on Saturday at 12.30pm. Tickets cost HK\$388 per person, including lunch.

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