

## Alexander Chee

In 2001, after encountering numerous rejections by mainstream publishers, Alexander Chee's debut novel, the semi-autobiographical *Edinburgh*, was published by a relatively obscure indie press, *Welcome Rain*. But in one of those dream come true stories, the book received enthusiastic critical responses, enough so that a major publisher, Picador, relaunched the paperback version of the book to much greater commercial success.

*Edinburgh's* parade of honors and awards -- selected by Publisher's Weekly, Booklist and Kirkus Reviews as a Notable Debut of 2001; a winner of the Lambda Editor's Choice Prize, the Asian American Writers Workshop Literature Award, the Michener, and a finalist for the Ferro-Grumley Prize, 2003 -- helped launch a literary career that is as unique as it is impressive. After the publication of *Edinburgh* -- actually beginning several years before the publication of *Edinburgh* -- Chee spent some 15 years writing his second novel, *Queen of the Night* that appeared finally in 2016, and that, on the face of it, was almost as different from the carefully contained, personally based *Edinburgh* as possible: the new novel, a long, picaresque story, follows the amazing adventures of one Lilliet Berne in the period 1867-1882, primarily set in France's Second Empire (and its fall), consisting of a succession of breathtaking shifts in her identity, career, class, and circumstances, incorporating as well a myriad of intriguing subplots and several cameo appearances by famous historical figures.

While toiling for a decade and a half on the research, writing, rewriting, and reconfiguring the second novel, Chee forged a significant public literary presence as a critic, a blogger (on his very own *Korean-ish*); and as an inveterate twitterer and social network pioneer, responsible for such far-out initiatives as the Amtrak residency (providing writers with an opportunity to ride the Amtrak trains for free, and perhaps to be inspired to write); and, at New York's mecca for writers, the Ace Hotel, he initiated the "Dear Reader" series, in which a writer, one of whom was Chee himself, would spend a night at the Hotel, and compose a letter to an imagined audience of hotel guests -- and that would be distributed in hard copy to all the hotel residents.

One of the disputes that has roiled the literary community in recent years is the issue of cultural appropriation: who has the ability, even who has the right, to write fiction about specific ethnic, indigenous, or racial groups: in particular, does one have to be a member--whether by birth, by genes, by family or cultural history -- of such a group to produce a valid fictional portrayal? Responses to such questions differ, often vituperatively, but Chee's first novel certainly gives no one cause for any such concerns: himself a gay, Korean-American

writer, who had been a boy soprano in a professional Maine boys choir, Chee's central character in *Edinburgh* is a gay, Korean-American boy soprano who sings in a professional Maine boys choir. And so *Edinburgh* hits every mark, legitimate or illegitimate, for writing what you know and who you are. But in *Queen of the Night*, published 15 years later, Chee seems to leave all these checkpoints far behind. Perhaps not a real surprise, since in his essays and interviews Chee is adamant about the fluidity and mutability, perhaps even the illusion, of imposed identities, whether in fiction or in life, and whether allegedly culturally or genetically determined.

There are, however, several important underlying connections between these two apparently disparate novels, though not connections that exist at the level of plot, setting, or character: for example, each has as its central character a singer and, in particular, a singer who knows or fears that his or her voice is transient, subject to precipitous disintegration. Voice functions as metaphor for both the triumphs and the unreliability of life, as a marker of both its nobility as well as fragility. Both Chee the novelist, and the fictional Fee, the boy soprano at the center of *Edinburgh*, are keenly aware that biology is rigged to abruptly terminate a youthful male voice; while Lilliet Berne, when she morphs into the great European opera diva, has the vocal range, the fach, of a falcon soprano (positioned between a soprano and a mezzo-soprano), so-named because of a soprano, Marie-Cornelie Falcon, whose brilliant voice famously broke permanently during a difficult singing passage when she was only twenty three-- and, putatively, perhaps mythically, such is the fate that threatens every Queen's throat situated in that doomed register.

Secrecy and secrets and the return of the repressed are at the heart of both books as well. In *Edinburgh* the systematic sexual abuse of the boys in the choir by the choirmaster drives the action. The secrets in the novel are many and, both hidden and exposed, they propel its violence and tragedy.

The narrative of *Queen of the Night* is explicitly driven by secrets; its structure generated by Lilliet's desperate attempts to find out which of only four possible suspects, each of whom has been very close to her in one or more of her previous lives, has now revealed her multiple pasts. Past that were all well hidden and segregated until -- as the novel commences -- they are on the verge of exposure through the story line of an actual opera in which Lilliet herself is slated to appear, revelations that would undermine her fatally while yet, paradoxically, being part of the most valued gift, in principle, that a diva can receive: an opera written explicitly for her. (So be careful what you wish for!)

Alexander Chee is a contributing editor at *The New Republic*, and an editor at large at *Virginia Quarterly Review*. His essays and stories have appeared in *The New York Times Book Review*, *Tin House*, *Slate*, *Guernica*, *NPR* and *Out*, among others. He has taught writing at Wesleyan University, Amherst College, the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop, Columbia University, Sarah Lawrence College and the University of Texas – Austin. The very good news for us is that he has just become a tenured member of Dartmouth's English department's creative writing program so we can look forward to seeing and hearing, as well as reading, much more of him in coming years. As our final reader of a great summer, I am pleased to introduce Alexander Chee.

