The Price of Eggs in China Study Guide

The Price of Eggs in China by Don Lee (author)

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Don Lee's story "The Price of Eggs in China" is concerned with art and love. The main character, Dean Kaneshiro, is a furniture builder who creates chairs so beautifully formed to the human body that, though he is only in his thirties, his works are on display in several important museums. He is dating Caroline Yip, who has had one successful book of poetry published, years earlier. At the time of its publication, Caroline came to be known in the press as "Oriental Hair Poet No. 1," because another young woman with long hair, Marcella Ahn, traveled in the same social circles and published a book of poetry at the same time. When Dean is hired to make a custom chair for Marcella, old rivalries rise up, and his loyalty to his craft and to the woman he loves is challenged.

Dean Kaneshiro takes a decidedly Japanese approach toward woodworking, with care for understanding the flow of each piece of wood he is cutting, attuning his tools to its nature. For Marcella and Caroline, who are, respectively, Korean and Chinese, race is most significant in the way that they are interchangeable in the public imagination, even though they write in strikingly different styles. Still, even though all three main characters in the story are of Asian descent, their setting has more to do with who they are than their ethnicity: they are residents of a sleepy coastal California town, spending time at the small diner and talking with the local police officer.

Don Lee is best known in literary circles as the long-time editor of *Ploughshares*, one of the most respected literary journals in the United States. This story, which was originally published in the *Gettysburg Review* in 2000, won the Pushcart Prize for that year. It is included in Lee's 2001 collection, *Yellow*.

Author Biography

Don Lee was born in 1959 in Tokyo, Japan, to parents that were second-generation Korean Americans. His father was a career diplomat for the U.S. State Department. Lee spent most of his childhood in Tokyo and Seoul. He originally majored in engineering at the University of California at Los Angeles but found it boring; an English teacher encouraged him to take a creative writing class, and doing so determined his career path. He graduated from UCLA with a bachelor's degree in English literature then went to Emerson College in Boston for a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing and literature.

After graduation, Lee taught a creative writing workshop at Emerson for three years and then took over as managing editor and assistant fiction editor of *Ploughshares*, a famous and highly respected literary magazine. He became the editor of *Ploughshares* in 1988. He also occasionally served as a writer-in-residence in Emerson's M.F.A. writing program.

Yellow, the short story collection in which "The Price of Eggs in China" was published, was written over a long period of time, due to Lee's slow writing process. Sometimes he completed only two stories a year. The book won the Sue Kaufman Prize for First Fiction and the Asian American Writers' Workshop Members' Choice Award. Lee's next work was a novel, *Country of Origin*, about a graduate student from Berkeley who goes to Japan to do research for her dissertation, ends up working in a nightclub and disappears into the seamy underworld of Tokyo nightlife: as in many of Lee's stories, questions of mixed racial identity and mixed national background are brought into play.

Lee's second novel, *Wrack and Ruin*, set in the fictional town of Rosarita Bay, which also serves as the setting for the stories of *Yellow*, was anticipated to appear in print in late 2007 or early 2008.

Plot Summary

“The Price of Eggs in China” begins with Dean Kaneshiro arriving at the house of “Oriental Hair Poet No. 2.” This poet, Marcella Ahn, called Dean two years earlier to hire him to make a chair for her. A master furniture builder and much in demand, Dean could not give her an earlier date to measure her. As the time of their appointed fitting has neared, Dean has sought out Marcella, only to find that by now she has moved to Rosarita Bay. There is already an Asian poet with beautiful long hair living in the town: Dean’s girlfriend, Caroline Yip.

Dean measures Marcella and asks her questions about her work then observes her as she sits at her chair and writes for twenty minutes, in order to understand her working habits. When she asks if she can come to his studio to watch him work, he adamantly refuses.

When he tells his girlfriend about having measured Marcella for a chair, Caroline is outraged and recounts her history with the other woman. They both lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts, when they were in their early twenties and were best friends. Their first books of poetry were published at about the same time, which earned them the collective nickname “The Oriental Hair Poets,” although their styles were completely different: Marcella Ahn’s poetry was quiet and thoughtful, while Caroline Yip’s was written in “a slangy, contemporary voice, full of topical, pop culture allusions.” After the books were published, Marcella attracted all of the critical attention, earning the coveted teaching jobs and having her picture on the covers of the best magazines. Caroline was left to linger in the shadow of Marcella’s career. Then a man who had been dating Caroline for seven years broke up with her, explaining that it was because of a remark Marcella had made, and Caroline moved away from the literary scene to live in isolation in California, where she met Dean.

Caroline assumes that Marcella moved to Rosarita Bay specifically to torment her, that she might need to torment Caroline for artistic inspiration. She tells Dean that, since he has no contract, he has no obligation to make the chair for her, but he says that he must.

Caroline begins receiving vague, mysteriously sinister gifts: candy and flowers, stuffed animals, lingerie and more. Afraid that she is being stalked, she moves in with Dean. Behind his house is a shed where he keeps the wood that he uses for furniture making: the wood is from rare Japanese zelkova trees that are a thousand to two thousand years old, and it must be stored in a controlled climate. Because it is so rare and will someday soon be unobtainable, Dean has stockpiled thousands of dollars of raw wood.

One day Marcella comes to Dean’s workshop, even though he has given explicit instructions against being interrupting. Despite Caroline’s insinuations, Marcella insists that moving to Rosarita Bay was just a coincidence. She also mentions that the only place she has seen a Dean Kaneshiro chair is in the Museum of Modern Art in New York. When she leaves, Caroline is furious: she had not known that Dean’s works were

so famous that they were in museums or that he had received a grant that gave him fifty thousand dollars a year for five years. Feeling humbled, she moves out of his house and back to her apartment.

Dean tries to win her back, going repeatedly to the diner where she works, though she refuses to talk with him. One day, he receives a summons to go to the police station, where he is questioned about harassing Marcella: leaving gifts at her door and leaving angry, threatening messages on her answering machine. The calls have been traced to pay phones, and the voice is not identifiable because the caller used a voice changing machine. Dean starts to believe that Marcella Ahn might be as fixated with Caroline as Caroline says she is.

Despite warnings to stay away from her, Dean goes to find Caroline. She has chopped her own hair off in a fit of manic worry. Dean devises a plan to implicate Marcella as a stalker. He finds out her routine then buys a voice changer and a lock picking kit. After phoning his own answering machine to make a threatening call with his voice disguised, he calls the police, who still are not convinced. He breaks into Marcella's house and takes a pair of her boots, some of her hair from a brush, and the ingredients for a firebomb. He then goes back to his house and starts a fire in his shed of rare, irreplaceable wood.

The fire causes more damage than he planned, since the sprinkler system does not go off. The evidence that he planted against Marcella is not noticed by the small town police force, but she agrees to leave town. Caroline submits her second book of poetry, and it is published to great reviews, and it wins awards.

Just before Marcella leaves town, Dean delivers her chair to him. He asks her to read Caroline's new poems and tell him if they are good. She tells him, during their conversation, that it was Caroline who prepared all of the phony evidence of being stalked, in order to frame Marcella. He refuses to believe her, and when she says that she does not think the poems are very good, he does not believe her about that either, insisting that he could see in her face as she read that she liked them. In the end, Dean and Caroline and their daughter, Anna, live happily together.

Characters

Marcella Ahn

Marcella is introduced into the story as “Oriental Hair Poet No. 2,” a designation that identifies her in relation to Caroline Yip. The two women have a long history together. They were inseparable friends in their twenties, when they were both young writers. When they had books of poetry published at the same time, Marcella’s was the one that was favored by the critics. Her book, *Speak to Desire*, was considered to be filled with serious poems of quiet observations. She was offered teaching jobs, awards, and residencies, taking all of the honors that Caroline applied for and was refused.

Marcella comes from a wealthy family: her father was a shipping tycoon, and she lives off the millions of dollars in her trust fund. She is Korean, wears heavy makeup, exercises regularly, and wears clothes that resemble lingerie.

Although Marcella is paying thousands of dollars for a desk chair to use when she writes, after the events of the story she never writes another collection of poetry.

Anna

At the end of the story, when the trouble with Marcella is over, Dean and Caroline have a baby named Anna, who cements their previously shaky relationship with each other.

Gene Becklund

Gene Becklund is a sergeant at the Rosarita Bay police department. He questions Dean about the threatening messages that have been left on Caroline’s answering machine. He feels that, since the couple has been broken up, Dean is a prime suspect, even though Caroline herself thinks it is Marcella Ahn who is stalking her. When Dean’s shed has been burned, he calls on Sergeant Becklund to investigate, intending Becklund to find the evidence he has planted against Marcella: Sergeant Becklund does a cursory examination of the scene and pronounces it arson but does nothing to find out who did it.

Dean Kaneshiro

Thirty-eight-year-old Dean Kaneshiro is a carpenter of Japanese descent. He is an exacting artisan. In order to make custom chairs, he measures the buyers in detail; if possible, he watches how they sit at their desk; if not, he gets the measurements from their tailor and watches a video of them at work if the buyers live far away. He is so good at what he does that his chairs are included in museum collections and are compared to works by famous architect Frank Lloyd Wright. He is modest about his

fame, though. He lives in a little house in a small town on the California coast, where even his girlfriend, Caroline Yip, is not aware of the fact that the Kaneshiro chair is so highly regarded in the art world.

Dean is devoted to Caroline, even though she is his opposite in many ways: sloppy where he is neat, loud where he is quiet, vulgar while he is polite, and insecure while he is confident. When she breaks up with him after finding out that he is not just a simple carpenter but is an internationally celebrated artist, he pursues her passively, going to the diner where she works until she eventually talks to him. Though he does not initially believe her assertion that Marcella Ahn is in Rosarita Bay to do her harm, his fear for her convinces him. His plan against Marcella includes breaking into her house to steal items that he can plant as evidence against her and starting a fire in his supply of zelkova wood, even though it is extremely expensive and increasingly rare.

Although he blames Marcella Ahn for threatening Caroline, he does finish her chair and deliver it to her, as a matter of honor. When Marcella tells him that Caroline made up the stalking incidents, his faith in Caroline is only shaken for a second. For the rest of his life, he suppresses his suspicion that Caroline fabricated the entire problem with Marcella Ahn, staying true to his woman despite his creeping doubts.

Hayashi Kota

Hayashi Kota is one of only three traditional master woodcutters in Japan who can cut the zelkova tree to Dean's specifications. His eye for choosing the right trees and cutting along the right part of the grain with the correct saw is irreplaceable, but he is sixty-nine and will soon not be reliable as a supplier.

Evan Paviromo

Evan Paviromo, the editor of a literary journal, dated Caroline Yip for seven years. She expected to marry him eventually and have children with him. He broke it off with her one day, offering no explanation until she pressured him: he then told her that Marcella had told him that he was generous for staying with someone whose work he did not respect, which made him realize that he is not really that generous at all, and his disrespect for Caroline's work would eventually become an issue between them.

Caroline Yip

Caroline is known in the literary world as "Oriental Hair Poet No. 1" because she has long hair and published her first book of poetry at the same time as her friend, Marcella Ahn. Caroline's poetry is much more earthy and vulgar than Marcella's is, and possibly as a result of that, it received less critical praise upon its publication. At about the same time that she watched her friend's poetry lauded, Caroline's seven-year relationship with her boyfriend, Evan Paviromo, ended because of a remark that Marcella made to him. Caroline dropped out of literary society, moved to Rosarita Bay, and became a waitress.

Caroline dresses plainly and talks crudely. She is distant to her boyfriend, Dean Kaneshiro, at first refusing to admit that she loves him and then breaking up with him when she finds out that his work is internationally famous and displayed in museums: she accuses him of having more in common with Marcella than with her.

When Caroline reports to the police that someone has been leaving anonymous gifts on her doorstep and calling her answering machine and leaving threats with a disguised voice, the police assume that it is Dean, with whom she has broken up. After Caroline cuts off her long hair and almost faints in his arms in the street, Dean is overcome with worry about her, and he becomes convinced that he has to do something against Marcella, who is a threat to Caroline's physical and mental health. Later, Marcella tells Dean that it is obvious that Caroline planted all of that evidence herself, which is a suspicion that he must struggle to suppress.

At the end of the story, Caroline is successful. She and Dean have a baby, Anna, together, and she publishes her second book of poetry to great critical acclaim, while her rival, Marcella, never publishes again.

Themes

True Love

The relationship between Dean Kaneshiro and Caroline Yip does not seem to have the ingredients of true, lasting love. Dean and Caroline are opposites in many ways: she is outspoken and he is quiet; she is messy and he is fastidious; she is hot tempered and he is unemotional. Still, at the end of the story, they are together, committed to one another and to their child, despite any suspicions each holds about the secrets the other might be hiding.

To some extent, their opposite personalities help them have a well-rounded relationship because they compliment one another. Caroline is clearly the decision maker in the relationship, holding back her declaration of love until weeks after Dean has left himself exposed by announcing that he loves her. She mocks and challenges him for his timidity and his lack of verbal skills. The equilibrium they have established is upset when she realizes that Dean is not simply a local carpenter who is impressed by her skill as a poet but is actually a renowned artist. At that point, with her dominant position threatened, she leaves him. They come back together after he humbles himself by coming to her place of work day after day with no encouragement from her. When he burns the rare wood that he needs for his chairs, he shows that Caroline is more precious to him than his art.

The story raises the question of whether the relationship between Caroline and Dean is one of true love or is just a case of psychological codependence between a needy person and a person who needs to be needed. In the end, Don Lee implies that true love is not really different than codependence.

Sacrifice

Dean Kaneshiro lives for his art. The story's first scene, in which he measures Marcella Ahn for a chair, shows the seriousness with which he takes his work: he follows strict rules, obeying his self-imposed standards, barely allowing conversation with his subject. When he won hundreds of thousands of dollars from an important grant, he used the money to buy more zelkova wood because it is the right wood for the kind of carving he does. He drives a ten-year-old truck and lives in a little house with cheap furniture. He does not pay attention to the circumstances of his life, engrossed in his work as he is.

Still, when he feels that Caroline is being threatened by Marcella, he is willing to sacrifice his irreplaceable zelkova wood to protect her. His scheme of burning the wood to implicate Marcella in a crime falls flat—the small-town police are not talented enough to find the evidence that he left against her, and a failed sprinkler system means more of the wood is burned than he anticipated. Dean is willing to sacrifice the art that he holds so dear for Caroline's safety, which places her above everything else in his life.

Reputation

Caroline is portrayed as very competitive, but Lee explains that she was not always that way. When they were young students, she and Marcella were best friends. Caroline's insecurities arose after her first poetry collection received much less critical and scholarly praise than Marcella's collection. In response to being considered a less talented writer, Caroline dropped out of the literary world, hiding herself away from the very idea of building an artistic reputation by becoming a waitress in a small, remote town.

Over time, Caroline has become comfortable with her lack of reputation. In the course of this story, however, two things happen to shake her complacency. The first is the reappearance of her old rival, Marcella, who garnered the reputation that Caroline felt she deserved. The second is finding out that Dean, who she thought was an inarticulate carpenter, far from the world of art, is in fact the recipient of major awards, grants, and museum retrospectives. The anxiety caused by having her own weak artistic reputation brought up makes her lash out at Dean and makes her probably try to frame Marcella as a stalker.

The story ends with the balance of power restored to Caroline and Dean's relationship when she publishes a book of poetry that earns her the recognition that she has felt she deserved. Her literary reputation is made even more secure when Marcella Ahn disappears from the literary world without ever writing again, and the public forgets her.

Style

By telling “The Price of Eggs in China” from a limited third-person point of view, Don Lee is able to control the information that readers are given. It is considered limited because most of the story is told from one character’s perspective, that of Dean Kaneshiro. Readers are not told of any occurrences that Dean does not know about.

Given this point of view, readers remain involved with Dean; the story unfolds on the page in the same order that it does in his life. But it also keeps readers from directly knowing what is going on in Dean’s head: some of his thoughts are conveyed, but his thought process is not revealed totally. For example, the narrative can be specific enough to tell readers that Dean wants to do all that he can to protect Caroline, but it can also be vague enough not to say exactly what Dean is planning when he breaks into Marcella’s home. Dean is a quiet person, not much given to saying what he is thinking or planning, and the author’s choice of point of view takes advantage of that to keep his behavior mysterious. Then too the limited third person restricts information about other characters’ motives. The mysterious phone caller and the gifts are not explained, though clearly someone in the story knows about them. Withholding this information adds to the suspense of the story by leaving Dean in the dark about what really happens between Marcella and Caroline.

Historical Context

Traditionally, U.S. history books have discounted the history of Asians in the United States and have focused instead on the path that European settlers followed, first to the New England colonies and then across the continent to the Pacific. In fact, there is evidence that Chinese admiral Zheng He reached North America seventy-two years before Christopher Columbus arrived in 1492. It is well documented that Filipinos working on Spanish galleons traveled to North America in 1587, fifty years before the British settled Jamestown. Since the Philippines were colonized by Spain, there were Filipinos in all of the Spanish communities, including Mexico, the southern United States, and the area that became California. A Filipino colony, the first Asian community in North America, was established in the Louisiana bayous in 1781. Soon, more Chinese men moved to the continent. Prohibited from gaining citizenship, many associated with the criminal element, such as the over two hundred men of Chinese descent who were documented in the 1760s as living on Calle de los Negros, a notorious center for illicit dealings in what later became Los Angeles. Around this same time, travel from China to Hawaii became common, and sailors frequently continued on from the islands to locations along the Pacific Coast, a practice that continued well into the twentieth century.

In the nineteenth century, U.S. businesses imported hundreds of thousands of Asian workers, mostly from China. Although these workers were not slaves, they could not apply for citizenship either, and so they were made to work for wages that were about half the going rate for Europeans. Approximately 90 percent of the workers on the Transcontinental Railway, built between 1864 and 1869, were Chinese.

By the time that Portsmouth Square was established in 1847 in what became San Francisco, there was already a strong Chinese presence in the area. The discovery of gold two years later led to the California gold rush, which drew many people from all over the world, including tens of thousands from China.

Throughout the twentieth century, Asian immigration to the United States continued. Most Asian immigrants came from China, which should not be surprising given that the Chinese population has always been many times that of all of the rest of Asia put together. Starting in the 1950s, Chinese emigration was curtailed by strict rules imposed by the communist government. Around that time, wars with Japan (1941–1945) and North Korea (1950–1953) made the United States an inhospitable place for Asians, slowing immigration.

The Immigration Act passed by Congress in 1965 raised the limits on Asian immigrants but also added restrictions that favored the middle class over the poor, which shifted the demographic of immigrants to more developed countries.

In the early 2000s, nearly one third of citizens of Asian Pacific descent lived in California. The Asian population increased about 30 percent between 1985 and 2005.

This rate of growth was expected to continue as international travel became increasingly easy and employment opportunities attracted new immigrants.

Critical Overview

After it was initially published in the *Gettysburg Review*, “The Price of Eggs in China” was chosen as one of the winners of the Pushcart Prize, and was subsequently included in the anthology *The Pushcart Prize XXVI: Best of the Small Presses 2002*. *Yellow*, the collection by Lee that includes this story, won the 2002 Sue Kaufman Prize for First Fiction and was a Barnes and Noble Discover Great New Writers selection.

Because Lee’s ethnic background is connected to the subject matter of the stories in *Yellow*, it is not surprising that the book received much attention from the Asian-American press. Andrew Sun, of the website *Asiaweek.com*, notes that “*Yellow* is mature and complex in its emotional dynamics. The tales are elegant, almost Chekhovian meditations on people trying to pick up the pieces of their lives.” A review at the similarly named *AsianWeek.com* site focuses on “The Price of Eggs in China” in particular, and concludes that “Lee’s stories are utterly contemporary, incredibly California, but grounded in the depth of beautiful prose and intriguing storylines.”

Beyond the Asian-American press, however, *Yellow* received national attention, with favorable reviews in many major media sources. *Publishers Weekly* tagged it as one of the most important short story collections of 2001, advising potential buyers that “*This appealing collection shouldn’t be relegated to Asian Studies shelves*” at libraries and bookstores. In the *New York Times Book Review*, writer Will Blythe observes that Lee “proves himself a worthy practitioner of realistic fiction in the vein of writers like Richard Yates and Andre Dubois. His narratives zip along, encapsulating whole lifetimes of intelligent men and women whose self-awareness is insufficient for the gauntlets they must run.” Jan Alexander, in a review in the *Chicago Tribune*, singled out “The Price of Eggs in China” as “by far the most scurrilously funny story” in *Yellow*. She praises Lee’s treatment of female characters but states that “his true talents emerge in his panoply of Asian-American men,” noting that he renders them “with a flair for dialogue that crackles with implications beyond what the characters are capable of articulating.”

Lee’s follow-up publication, the 2004 novel *Country of Origin*, was just as widely praised by reviewers for its wit and insight. With a mystery plot at its heart, it drew a more crossover audience, beyond the literary readers who already knew him for his work on *Ploughshares*.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Kelly is an instructor of creative writing and English literature. In the following essay, he looks at how this story, which seems to be about three people's bonds, is actually about how much easier it is to face loss when one has less to lose.

In his short story "The Price of Eggs in China," Don Lee presents a relationship triangle formed by Dean Kaneshiro, Caroline Yip, and Marcella Ahn, three artists who live in a fictional California coastal town and whose lives are connected, although the story never really makes clear if their connection is the result of fate or of cunning. They are undeniably bound to each other, though. Dean has been hired to build a chair for Marcella, and even though she hired him years earlier, a contract is an unbreakable vow to him. He goes to great trouble to locate her when it comes time to fulfill his contract, only to find that by then she has moved several times and has ended up in the same small town where he lives. At the same time, he is in love with Caroline, who, even though she is cool to him, seems to love him, too. Marcella and Caroline are linked by their friendship years earlier and, more annoyingly, by the literary critics, who have lumped them together as "Oriental Hair Poet No. 1" and Oriental Hair Poet No. 2."

But Dean is in love, and he has no control over the one thing that is more precious to him than money, fame, or talent. Caroline's instability frightens him and forces him to take steps that are not consistent with his professional detachment toward life.

With so much interdependence, this would appear to be a story about connections. To some extent, it is: the climax of the story occurs certainly when Dean and Caroline are able to get beyond the external forces that pull them apart and just bask in each other's love. But more than a story about love, this is a story about loss, and particularly about how much loss each of these guarded characters is able to endure.

If it is loss that hounds them, then it would seem that Caroline is in the most stable position of all of the characters. The story begins years after her one brush with fame, after the publication of a book of poetry right after college. Then, she was a rising star in the literary world: now, she is a waitress in a café. This change of circumstances would be fine if she were someone who found that fame was not for her and she preferred the quiet, simple life, but she clearly is not that person. She has not found peace, as her chronic insomnia indicates.

To say that something is bothering Caroline is an understatement. She is desperate. As Lee puts it: "she had done everything possible short of psychology—which she didn't believe in—to alleviate her insomnia and insistent stress: acupuncture, herbs, yoga, homeopathy, tai chi." Dropping out of literary society has evidently not helped her. In addition, she has a casual attitude toward Dean's affection for her. She admits to not loving him when he declares his love for her, and she drives him away from her in anger

when she finds out that he is more than just a talented local carpenter. It appears that Caroline has very little to lose, that her life is already too messy for her to sink much lower.

Yet, her violent negative reaction to Dean's artistic success is a clear indicator that she does still have a self-image to protect. Her fear and hatred of Marcella Ahn is another sign that Caroline feels she has something that can be threatened. She may be right, and Marcella may have planned to become involved with Dean as part of a grand scheme to humiliate Caroline, even though Marcella first contacted him years before Dean even met Caroline. More likely, the threat that she feels from Marcella is so intense that it drives Caroline into extreme fear. Chopping her own hair is an act that conveys Caroline's self-destructiveness and her fear of being compared with the other Oriental Hair Poet.

In contrast to Caroline, Marcella Ahn seems to have a great deal to lose, even though she seems to be in a position to handily absorb anything life offers to her. Money means nothing to her, as she has inherited millions and has had her pick of high-paying teaching jobs and grants. Prestige is at her fingertips and has been since she and Caroline published their first books of poetry. Physically, Caroline is probably an attractive woman, although the story does not actually establish that. Lee describes her as muscular and tall, but he avoids making any particular judgment about whether she is good looking, taking instead the sort of detached and professional mien that Dean himself would take to her: even though the narrative lingers over the fact that she has "a good butt, a firm, StairMastered butt, a shapely, surprisingly protuberant butt," it is not done as a comment on her appeal so much as it is an indication of Dean's clinical approach to details concerning his customers' body types and how they will fit his chairs.

With all these advantages, Marcella Ahn could easily put herself above the personal drama that is played out in Rosarita Bay between Dean and Caroline. For most of the story, it seems as if she is in fact above it. She does flirt with Dean, but her flirting is not necessarily a jibe at her old rival Caroline: she might just be the kind of person to whom flirting comes naturally. She seems capable of accepting anything that comes to her with ease, until the story's end.

Dean asks Marcella's opinion of the poems that Caroline has written because he knows his own limitations. He works with his hands and is uncomfortable with words. Yet he reads beyond what Marcella says, interpreting her facial expression as suggesting that Marcella is impressed with Caroline's poetry. It would be easy to believe that Dean is simply seeing what he wants to see, in defense of the woman he loves. But when Marcella loses her composure over the issue, the story provides proof that she has an emotional involvement in believing Caroline to be untalented. At the height of the story, Marcella is desperate to have Dean believe that her composure is intact, and her desperation is proof that her self-esteem is shaky. Further proof lies in the fact that, after the events at Rosarita Bay, Marcella goes on to never publish poetry again. The story links her loss of writing to the trauma of finding Caroline to be a talented writer, and she tries to suppress that knowledge.

Like Marcella, Dean seems to have little to lose. He is respected for his artistry to a degree that is beyond the reach of most artists. Hundreds of thousands of dollars flow his way from grants and commissions; his work is displayed in museums; he is compared to the greatest artists who have worked in his field; and all of this recognition has occurred, as Caroline points out, while he is still a relatively young man. To make matters even better, Dean has won all of this acclaim without even trying for it, on the basis of his impressive talent alone: his phenomenal skill is second only to his artistic integrity. For many other artists, he is living the ideal life.

But Dean is in love, and he has no control over the one thing that is more precious to him than money, fame, or talent. Caroline's instability frightens him and forces him to take steps that are not consistent with his professional detachment toward life. First, he deludes himself, believing against all evidence that Marcella is behind the disguised-voice phone calls and mysterious packages that Caroline claims to have received. He then goes further in his desperation, to the point where he tries to frame Marcella for a crime. It is a foolish scheme, but he thinks it will protect Caroline.

Dean pays for his foolishness. He loses his rare zelkova wood, and by extension he forfeits a part of his artistic integrity—the substitute, English walnut, may be good, but it is a compromise nonetheless. Worse, by going about helping Caroline in the way he has—and it may well be the only way Caroline would let herself be helped—Dean has created a secret that he can never discuss with her, even if they live the rest of their lives together, as the story suggests they will. In the end, Dean and Caroline speculate about what secrets are held by the product of their union, the child Anna, who has inherited Caroline's uneasiness even as Caroline has learned to sleep comfortably.

Everybody pays a price in "The Price of Eggs in China." Marcella loses her ability to produce artistically, and Dean loses his artistic purity. Caroline, who has been pushing herself for years to deny her talent, faces her worst fears about herself: in the end, she is happy and well-adjusted, a better person for having paid the price.

Source: David Kelly, Critical Essay on "The Price of Eggs in China," in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Critical Essay #2

Dyer holds a Ph.D. in English literature and has published extensively on fiction, poetry, film, and television. He is also a freelance university teacher, writer, and educational consultant. In the following essay, he discusses "The Price of Eggs in China" as a quest story, in which an artist changes his vision and finds a new art style and life.

Any artist can attest that creative vision is not static. Rather, at any one point, vision and artwork are, like one of Dean Kaneshiro's chairs, a carefully crafted negotiation of numerous pieces "put together by joints, forty-four delicate, intricate joints." Over time, the vision and artwork change. For most artists, the work is a process of defining one's style in reference to tradition and also to current ideas or circumstances. An artist who aims to replicate one work of art, Dean learns in this story about how artistic vision and artwork can change with circumstances.

. . . Dean establishes himself as a new man, an artist who works with more affordable and marketable English walnut, and a new father with the birth of his daughter Anna.

Some artists sustain one artistic vision, become "tenaciously, permanently locked" on it, as though their identity, their style, and their artwork are all fused. These artists combine their sense of tradition and ancestry with their sense of contemporary culture. These individuals are fitted into their artistic identity so neatly that it cannot "budge" or "squeak." Yet even for such artists, the defining vision can evolve through stages, change out of necessity or impulse; commitment to replication shifts or revises over time.

Dean is determined in his dedication to the "traditional method of Japanese joinery dating to the seventeenth century," and he uses this method to perfect the chair that carries his name. Successful with making this one object, Dean becomes increasingly committed to replicating the single product, his chair. He is increasingly focused on this one design idea, though over time that idea has changed a little. "He made only armchairs now, one chair over and over, the Kaneshiro Chair." Focused on the craft rather than the art, he admits, his ultimate goal is "to get to a point where he could make a Kaneshiro Chair blindfolded."

At the same time that he is set on producing the chairs, Dean practically hordes the raw materials he uses. The chairs are made of rare and exorbitantly expensive Japanese zelkova wood. He has stockpiled the wood, almost finding the wood itself more important than what he can make from it. In fact, he responds emotionally to the raw materials of his craft: "When he went into the shed to select a new board," he confesses, "he was always overcome by the beauty of the wood, the smell of it. He'd run his hand over the boards—hardly a check or crack on them—and would want to weep."

This hesitation to use the raw materials seems akin to Dean‘s apparent discomfort with commercial success and art world fame. His chairs are exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art and the American Craft Museum, and he is able to charge ten thousand dollars for a single chair, which takes him less than three weeks to build. Known in the art world and earning a lot of money, he could live among the elite. Yet he chooses to live where he is unknown, in “secluded and quiet” Rosarita Bay, a place that seems in some ways too small and too remote, “a no-man’s-land, a sleepy, slightly seedy backwater . . . a place of exile.” Here, Dean hides his urban reputation and recognition.

Moreover, Dean’s productivity in this town is stymied by the presence of two poets who are themselves in conflict: Marcella Ahn and Caroline Yip. These women were once seemingly joined at the hip, close friends whom popular media labeled “‘The Oriental Hair Poets,’ ‘The Braids of the East,’ and ‘The New Asian Poe-tresses.’” But in truth the women contrast with each other in their own poetic styles. Marcella, who has commissioned Dean to build her a chair, is a critically successful poet. She is “obsessive-compulsive neat,” media savvy, and potentially “a vulture, a vampire.” Marcella is dangerous to Dean's art, to his physical health, and to his relationship with Caroline. Marcella’s poetry is “highly erudite, usually beginning with mundane observations about birds or plant life, then slipping into long abstract meditations.” By contrast, Caroline Yip is a romantic at heart and a writer who carries the scars of being “skewered” for a poetry that has “a slangy, contemporary voice, full of topical, pop culture allusions.” Hot-tempered Caroline is threatened when Marcella moves to town and she is upset to learn that Dean has measured her for one of his chairs. Dean gets caught between these competing women, and his involvement and responses affect his raw materials and in turn his artwork.

At once sustained and burdened by his early acclaim as an artist, Dean struggles to move forward in his art. He does not question himself about what his art might stand for, and he buffers himself against bigger questions. Is he comfortable, for instance, with the fees he charges for his chairs, and if so, why does he live like he poor? Has the medium of his art and his quest for perfection erased the creative energy that made possible his early success? Has he allowed this drive for perfection of a single idea to overtake the once powerful drive to create new forms and explore new ideas? Has he been corrupted by the commodity-driven American culture in which he works and, connected to that, has his artwork become commodity?

As Marcella’s appearance in town threatens his relationship with Caroline, Dean is forced to find a new path between the opposite impulses or contrasts that press in upon him. As he contends with the interactions between Marcella and Caroline he undertakes a quest for a new inspiration and a new way of making his art. Dean is compelled by a series of events to re-create himself and his art. Accused of making obscene phone calls and forced to admit that Marcella might be stalking Caroline, Dean tries to clear his name, free Caroline from her competition with Marcella, and cut himself off from the elitist traditions that the zelkova represents. Setting fire to his own wood shed and destroying most of the stock, Dean hopes to frame Marcella for the crime, an act that contributes to her leaving Rosarita Bay. With Marcella gone, Dean establishes himself as a new man, an artist who works with more affordable and marketable English walnut,

and a new father with the birth of his daughter Anna. In other words, Dean finds a way to live a more ordinary life, able to market his chairs more widely, able to settle into a family life.

With the fire, Dean brings about a new vision of himself and his work. By replacing the zelkova with a populist wood that is “pretty, durable, [and] available,” Dean becomes a hybrid, one that combines the old joinery techniques and new wood. In this newly created form, he finds a truth that extends beyond tradition and beyond his obsessive search for the perfect chair. He finds a truth about himself that lies, ultimately, in the dreams of his infant daughter who, “still asleep, lolled her head, her lips pecking the air in steady rhythm—an infant soliloquy.” In paying “the price of devotion” to both Caroline and his art, Dean sees in his daughter’s dreams an inspiration that he never before imagined.

Source: Klay Dyer, Critical Essay on “The Price of Eggs in China,” in *Short Stories for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2007.

Adaptations

- Lee maintains a personal website, http://www.don-lee.com/index.htm, with links to publications, appearances, and other matters of interest to fans.

Topics for Further Study

- Go to a museum or a museum website and examine chair designs by Frank Lloyd Wright and other modern artists. From these designs, along with Lee's description in the story, draw what you visualize as a Dean Kaneshiro chair.

- Write a poem in the style of Caroline Yip and a poem in the style of Marcella Ahn.

- Dean has a problem in this story because there are only a few master woodcutters left who can work properly with zelkova wood. Find out how zelkova is harvested. Report on the process commonly used, and how it differs from how other types of wood are gathered. Do a report on the wood in which you take a position on using nonrenewable natural resources.

- Buy or make a voice changer. Try it out in your class, giving classmates a chance to guess whose voice they are hearing when blindfolded.

What Do I Read Next?

- Don Lee followed *Yellow*, the collection which contains this story, with his 2004 novel, *Country of Origin*. This critically acclaimed book centers on a mystery. A graduate student of Japanese-African-American descent goes to Tokyo to do research, ends up working in a men's club and disappears, leaving a Foreign Service junior officer and a jaded police detective to look for clues.

- Amy Tan's 1989 novel *The Joy Luck Club* takes place in San Francisco's Chinatown, and like *Yellow*, it tells the interconnected stories of a community. It is often credited with starting a national trend toward interest in the Asian-American experience. *The Joy Luck Club* was reissued in an edition by Penguin in 2006.

- Chang-Rae Lee is a much-lauded Korean-American writer. His novel *Aloft* (2004) was on the *New York Times* bestseller list: it is about a white middle-class patriarch of a family that is becoming diverse and divided.

- Marilyn Chin, an Asian-American poet who blends tradition with confrontational language, is the kind of outspoken writer that Lee might have had in mind when he described Caroline Yip's contemporary writing style. Her poems in the 2003 collection, *Rhapsody in Plain Yellow: Poems*, have been lauded for their innovation and daring.

Further Study

Cranz, Galen, *The Chair: Rethinking Culture, Body, and Design*, Plume, 2004.

This history of chair design, focusing on the more recent developments in ergonomics, is the kind of work that the story's Dean Kaneshiro might read.

Huang, Guiyou, *The Columbia Guide to Asian American Literature since 1945*, Columbia University Press, 2006.

This book breaks down Asian-American writings since World War II into specific genres, showing those who paved the way for contemporary writers such as Lee.

Manning, Kathleen, and Jerry Crow, *Half Moon Bay (Images of America Series)*, Arcadia Publishing, 2005.

This pictorial history of the town on which Lee based his fictional Rosarita Bay gives readers a sense of the places that he describes in this and other stories.

Novas, Himilce, and Lan Cao, *Everything You Need to Know about Asian American History*, Norton, 2000.

Written in a more lighthearted style than most history texts, this book covers the lives of people from the Pacific Rim going back to before Columbus.

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Alexander, Jan, “Variations on Asian States of Mind,” in *Chicago Tribune*, July 8, 2001, Section 14, p. 2.

Blythe, Will, “Both Sides of the Hyphen: Two Very Different Story Collections Explore Questions of Asian-American Identity,” in *New York Times Book Review*, July 15, 2001, p. 6.

Review of *Yellow*, in *AsianWeek.com*, March 30-April 5, 2001, http://www.asianweek/com/2001_03_30/ae3_litpicks.html (accessed September 11, 2006).

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Sun, Andrew, “Beyond Racial Melodramas,” in *Asiaweek.com*, September 21, 2001, http://www.asiaweek.com/asiaweek/magazine/Life/0,8782,174693,00.html (accessed September 11, 2006).

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's"For Students" Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on "classic" novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of "classic" novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members—educational professionals— helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man–the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. • Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an “at-a-glance” comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author’s time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes “The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,” a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children’s Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

“Night.” Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234–35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the “Criticism” subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on “Winesburg, Ohio.” Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335–39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. “Margaret Atwood’s “The Handmaid’s Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,” Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9–16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133–36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. “Richard Wright: “Wearing the Mask,” in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69–83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59–61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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