

Interview with Sherry Quan Lee, Author of *How to Write a Suicide Note*

Today, Tyler R. Tichelaar of Reader Views is pleased to interview Sherry Quan Lee, who is here to talk about her new book *How to Write a Suicide Note: serial essays that saved a woman's life.*

Sherry Quan Lee, author of "Chinese Blackbird," Asian American Renaissance, 2002, reprint by Loving Healing Press, July 2008, approaches writing as a community resource and as culturally based art of an ordinary everyday practical aesthetic. Quan Lee is the Program Associate for the Split Rock Arts Program summer workshops and the Online Mentoring for Writers Program at the University of Minnesota where she also earned her MFA in Creative Writing. Recently retired from teaching Creative Writing at Metropolitan State University, St. Paul, MN, to complete "How to Write a Suicide Note: serial essays that saved a woman's life," she now teaches daylong workshops.

"How to Write a Suicide Note: serial essays that saved a woman's life" examines the life of a Chinese/Black woman who grew up passing for white, who grew up poor, who loves women but has always married white men. Writing has saved her life. It has allowed her to name the historical trauma—the racist, sexist, classist experiences that have kept her from being fully alive, that have screamed at her loudly and consistently that she was no good, and would never be any good—and that no one could love her. Writing has given her the creative power to name the experiences that dictated who she was, even before she was born, and write notes to them, suicide notes.

Sherry Quan Lee believes writing saves lives; writing has saved her life.

Tyler: Welcome, Sherry. First, let me say, WOW! What a title. I can't wait to hear more about your book, but before we get too involved in it, will you explain that title so our readers don't think you are advocating suicide?

Sherry: A perfect first question, Tyler. Suicide notes are the metaphor for getting rid of what kept me from living. For instance, killing off/writing off the white girl, thus allowing the Chinese/Black girl to live. A friend actually came up with the title. I loved it, but was afraid of it. Because, yes, I am not advocating suicide. Family members have tried committing suicide (my grandmother and an uncle committed suicide), people I know, know people who have committed suicide—I have tried committing suicide.

But writing I can experience death without leaving this world. Also, knowing that I can write, and the act of writing have given me a reason to live.

Tyler: Sherry, I understand your ethnic background is Chinese and African-American. Will you tell us about how that background influenced your life and who you became?

Sherry: Actually, it was the absence of being Chinese and Black (I prefer Black over the hyphenated African-American, or even Negro when used in the context of my birth certificate that states: Mother's race, Negro). I grew up in the sixties in an almost all white neighborhood (interestingly, this neighborhood is now mostly people of color). For reasons I didn't understand at the time, my mother claimed we were white. "Passing" is a term Black people are familiar with. Many who could pass, passed to have jobs, but then returned home to their black communities.

A therapist asked me, how could I feel good about myself when my mother hid who I was, a black/Chinese child? I wasn't good enough to be me! For the first time, I began to understand my fears, my loneliness, my anger—my need to be loved for who I am.

Tyler: Have you developed more of an appreciation or connection to African American and Chinese culture in more recent years, or do you feel like an outsider in those cultures?

Sherry: Tyler, I guess I would say I have developed a desire for those cultures. But it's all very complicated. When I first started writing about my identity, people would ask why I wrote about being Black and not about being Chinese. It was an interesting observation. The simplest answer is that I was involved in writing groups of mostly black writers. A more complicated answer is that I was told to deny my black identity, but when necessary, I could embrace being Chinese. My writing became a tool to become the person I was told I couldn't be. Writing was a way to understand why Mother wanted me to be white, or to be a "*beautiful exotic Chinese female*," but not a black woman.

I am now, finally, through years of education and therapy, through reading and writing, able to be Black, or be Chinese, or be Black/Chinese. Sometimes, I even acknowledge being white!

Outsider? No. But, different.

Once I bought a t-shirt that had the words "*love sees no color*" printed on it. How easily I was manipulated! I want love to see color, embrace it, and understand it—understand all the negative socially constructed views attached to race/to color, and still love me.

Tyler: Do you think your book appeals to men as well as women or even people not of multicultural backgrounds? What would be the advantages to their reading "*How to Write a Suicide Note*?"

Sherry: I think the book would be a good read for men. Men have stories to tell, and should tell them. I think writing can be a way for more men to open up emotionally, and write toward understanding themselves—and the people in their lives. "*How to Write a Suicide Note*" is about relationships, and one theme that carries the book forward is the relationship between an Irish, Catholic man and his dog/and me.

I hope the book will also be an important read for writers—even writers not of multicultural backgrounds—who aren't writing or haven't started to write because too many rules have stopped them. Do I get up every day at 5 a.m. to write? No, and I don't want to. Do I write sonnets, or haiku, or...? No, and I don't want to. Okay, well, maybe I want to, but I don't have the luxury—won't allow myself the luxury—I write because I have to. Most of the time, I'd rather be doing something else.

Tyler: Sherry, tell us about your writing of these essays. How did writing become such an important form of release for you?

Sherry: Tyler, these essays are actually poems. "*How to Write a Suicide Note: serial essays that saved a woman's life*" began as a project in prose. A mentor, David Mura, told me it was time to write my life, that I probably had six memoirs (or novels) that needed to be written. I was reluctant, but determined. Unfortunately, what I kept writing were two to three page personal essays that were somewhat lifeless. Hmmm, dead. A friend saw a spark of my poetic voice, and that was all that I needed to turn the entire manuscript into poetry.

The back story is that when I was in my thirties, I went back to college. I took a class called "*Women in Literature*." We were told to go to a bookstore, any bookstore, and browse through the books. I went to our local feminist bookstore and discovered there were no books about me: a Chinese/Black woman who grew up passing for white. I went home and wrote—poem after poem after poem. I was also taking a poetry class that semester. The pile of poems I brought into class became the chapbook, "*A Little Mixed Up*," Guild Press, 1982. This is how I began writing about identity. I haven't stopped.

Tyler: I assume you initially started writing for your own benefit. At what point did you decide you should share your writing with others?

Sherry: Actually, I probably started writing because I was angry! I wrote not only for me, but to give visibility to all of us who are invisible.

Tyler: Sherry, will you share the names of a few of the essays in the book and briefly what they are about and what inspired you to write them?

Sherry: The process of writing a book is fascinating and difficult. There are not many resources, though I tend to go with my gut feelings, and with my heart. After the fact, I discovered the book by Philip Gerard, “*Writing a Book that Makes a Difference*,” which I highly recommend. I had a story to tell that I thought was important. I wanted to write a book about how to write because there are few books about writing by writers of color. (There are books about writing in general, but books on how to write a book, I couldn’t find.) Eventually, “*How to Write a Suicide Note*” became a book about parts of my life, as well as a book about my writing process, as well as a book about my philosophy that writing saves lives.

Each section of my book began with a suicide note, some more abstract than others. I began the book at what I thought was the end of the book, believing endings are beginnings, death is life. One of the poems, “Suicide Note Number Two” is about killing the white girl. It is about no longer being the white girl I was brought up to be in order to let the Chinese/Black girl live.

Other poems are about relationships. I have always been a caretaker, and as a caretaker I tended to fall in love with controllers. I needed to write away the people in my life whom I so easily acquiesced to. There was never space enough for me to be seen or to be heard. My mother used to say, “*a bad husband is better than no husband*.” In a sense she was right because loneliness was something that devastated me. What I discovered, though, was it wasn’t about the husbands necessarily being bad—they all loved me—but, I was looking for something they couldn’t give me. I was looking for me. And, as I discovered who I am, I knew if I were to be in a relationship with someone, they needed to embrace all of me, and no one can do that if they don’t want to stop looking in their mirror, and try to look at and understand the complex, colorful woman I am.

Tyler: What is the response you are hoping your readers will come away with after they finish reading “*How to Write a Suicide Note*”?

Sherry: I want readers to know the complexity of being a woman of color, particularly a biracial woman. Women of color feminists know that who we are is not just this or that. We know that race, gender, sexuality, age, etc. intersect in multiple ways. Intersectionality is a means to define more accurately who we are.

I hope readers will understand how writing has saved my life.

I hope readers will understand that stereotypes do not represent real people.

I hope readers will understand historic trauma is also present trauma. We can’t, as many people would like us to do, just *get over it*—I believe trauma lives in our bodies, our bones, and our spirits.

I hope readers will understand that their stories, too, are important, and they can and should write them.

And, I hope readers will have enjoyed the writing for the writing—the sound of it, the tone of it, the voice that is speaking.

Tyler: Do you plan to write any other books?

Sherry: The book I have started writing is “*Imagine Love*,” or some such thing. Hoping my writing/my life is ready to move beyond survival towards love. However, the book that I have been wanting to write for many years is a book that discloses multiple parallel stories of people of color based on a historical timeline and connects them in some way to the present. I believe I can write these stories as poetic narratives.

Tyler: Sherry, before we go, will you tell our readers where they can buy copies of “*How to Write a Suicide Note: serial essays that saved a woman’s life*”?

Sherry: My website is in the process of being re-designed. It is <http://sherryquanlee.com>. My books are also available on Amazon.

Tyler: Thank you, Sherry, for joining me today and for the fine interview. I wish you much luck with “*How to Write a Suicide Note*.”

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