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Gish Jen talks about how she became a writer

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Following are excerpts from an interview Rob Neufeld had with Gish Jen.

Q: When you started writing “Mona in the Promised Land,” were you thinking that you were going to write a comedy of errors right from the start?

A: That book came out of a story. I was three-quarters of the way through “Typical American.” I took a little break and I wrote this story, and then I put it aside. The story came so easily, and sometimes when things come so very, very easily that way, it’s a sign of some sort. I did think when I wrote it, “Ah! There’s my next book.”...When I wrote the story, the whole business about Mona’s conversion to Judaism was not in it. Mona was a girl having adventures in her new town. The interest in and invention of ethnicity were not there yet.

Q: Is comedy a kind of a muse for you? Do you feel your way toward situations where there will be a lot of comedy?

A: You know, not necessarily. I see comedy as something that I do so easily, that I often try to pull back from it. I finished “Mona,” for instance, and I thought, this book is too funny. I’m often working to get the deeper register...In edits, I’ll often rein back the broader humor. I guess that’s to say that I’m not looking for humor. Humor’s just there.

Q: Do you have certain hopes for bridging cultural chasms?

A: Finally, I guess I do. I would not say I wrote for that purpose—but certainly the thought that my work would make people think, and that that might help them understand cultural difference—these are things that I would love to see.

Q: When did you know you were a writer? I imagine most writers write because they can’t do anything else.

A: Actually, that’s very true. People come to me and ask me should they become a writer. And I ask them if they feel that they could do something else. Because if you feel that you could do something else, you’re just not going to have the stick-to-it-ness that you’re going to need to be a writer...I had this moment of revelation when I was in my late twenties. This is a little morbid. The daughter of immigrants, I had never been to a funeral. I went to my first funeral and I thought, “Oh my God, we’re all going to die.” I had this vision of myself on my deathbed, and I realized if I had never tried to become a writer, I’d be lying there thinking, “Why didn’t I try to become a writer?” I think sometimes it’s that knowledge that keeps me going. There are other things that theoretically I could do, but I don’t think that I could have lived with myself if I had done them instead.

Q: How did you recognize—aside from the urge—that you had the skills?

A: I really didn’t. I think, in retrospect, I had a lot of encouragement...“Typical Americans” is about to be featured in this PBS series on the American novel...It’s funny because suddenly everyone is talking about that book, my first novel. I remember sitting down to write the first line of that book, and I can’t even tell you how unlikely it seemed to me that anyone would ever publish that book, much less that it would go on the way it has. I wrote that book, I had just gotten to the Bunting Institute, which is now the Radcliffe Institute at Harvard. It was my fifth day there. The first day, we’d gone around a circle, and people had asked what we were, and I said I was a would-be writer. It never occurred to me to try to write a novel. And then day five, being at this amazing place full of ambitious women, I said, “Oh, maybe I’ll write a novel.” I sat down and wrote “Typical American.”

Q: In "The Love Wife" and in short stories, you leave the Chang family. But the Chang family and all the people associated with it are so fully developed, how do you free yourself from the Chang family? Will they continue to come back?

A: You know, everyone was looking for that third Chang family book. I don't why...I'm just in the throes of finishing up a new book, and it's not the Chang family and it's not the Wong family either!

Q: Do you have a particular attraction to Judaism.

A: Growing up in the New York area, it's not even an attraction. You grow up in the New York area as I did, you're going to have a lot of Jewish friends. There are parts of Judaism that I have to say became mine. I'm not Jewish. In fact, I grew up Catholic. I think especially of the (Jewish) interest in society. The people around me, growing up in Scarsdale, were very socially engaged. I really respect that. Also, a tolerance for other faiths. It always impressed me that B'nai Brith so went out of their way to support not only Jews, but other religious groups. That kind of thing—I think that all those values that I hold today—toleration, social activism—came to me via Judaism, and that way I will always have a special place in my heart for Judaism.

Q: Are you ever going to write more about or research more into the Cultural Revolution?

A: It's there in the background. But I'm primarily interested in America. I feel that I did not live through the Cultural Revolution. There are so many people who did, and I'm not sure that I am the right filter for that experience. My preoccupation is really with identity, globalization, Diaspora things, things that maybe I know better.

Q: You said you had various people encourage you in your writing. Who was your first encourager?

A: The great encourager of my life was Robert Fitzgerald at Harvard.

Q: The translator.

A: The translator—and very erudite and wonderful man. I took his class in first form when I was a junior because I was an English major, and I didn't understand why poetry had to be written in those little lines. I thought when he said in his class there'd be a weekly exercise, I thought he meant a paper, and it turns out he meant a weekly exercise in verse. I said, "Oh my gosh. I don't think I can do that," but I thought, first week, if I don't like it, I can always drop, let me just try. And I wrote that first poem, and I loved it. I loved writing right away. And I loved his class. I don't think I ever imagined that it was something I should do with myself. Because Robert Fitzgerald took me aside—I had written a paper on prose rhythms in Henry James, and he was going over my paper with me, and he was nodding, nodding, nodding. He was the first person to sort of say, "Now, why are you pre-med?"—a question not very easily answered because I had just gotten a C in chemistry. He's the first to sort of say, "Have you thought about being a poet?" I said, "No, I have not thought about being a poet!" He said to me that he really thought I should do something with words. He was very adamant about that. When I said I didn't think I could be a poet, he did give me a job in publishing as my first job out of college.

Q: he did?

A: Yeah, he called up the managing editor of the house that he was at then, which was Doubleday, and he said, "I have this student." Sometimes when I think of him, I'm overwhelmed with gratitude because I do feel that I have owed my whole writing life to him, and the interest that he took in me and my future.

Q: So where is the poetry of Gish Jen?

A: It's funny, but I think from the very beginning I was very narrative. I still love to read poetry, but I think my drive is narrative, even toward the novel more than the short story.

Q: There are a lot of different rhythms as you go through the book. The plot shifts and becomes something different. For instance, in "Mona," when it opens up into that 1970s scene in the Gugelstein house. Wow! What a window!...It

was toward the end, when we were headed toward marriages, and people were going in and out like Marx Brothers characters, I said now it's this. It is fun. But also there are a lot of different rhythms, partly because of the narrator's voice, and partly because of the characters and their manners of speech. Are you a student of manners of speech?

A: I'm not a student of them, but I notice and I hear. I guess that what Fitzgerald was trying to tell me, that I had an ear, and, for whatever reason, I notice that I have a lot of these voices in me when I start to write them on the page, they just came out. I can't say how I picked them up, but clearly I did. You can hear a lot of Jewish New York voice in Mona, for instance. I was not aware of picking that up, but there it all is.

Q: I think that's an important ability for a writer. I'm not sure they teach that in writing classes as they teach it in acting classes. What do you think about that?

A: It's interesting. I actually didn't know that they taught it in acting classes. But of course, now that you're saying it. You're right, I don't know that they teach it in writing classes. But it's true that the teachers have an ear and encourage students to listen as well as to write. The funny thing about writing is that people imagine it's a very productive activity, that you're writing, you're making, but I think the actual experience of it is a lot like listening. You feel that you are simply hearing and recording, and it doesn't feel that you are writing. You feel that you are receiving. I think that many writers would describe the process that way, and that in teaching writing, we would emphasize the listening aspect of it.

Q: You teach writing, right?

A: I've actually taught very little, although I've just taken a new job at Brandeis, I'm happy to say. I don't start until 2008, and I'm looking forward to it.

Q: And what is your job there?

A: I'll be professor of English, teaching writing.

Q: Great. Congratulations! Do you have an example of a writing assignment that you would give?

A: I don't have an example. I've been pretty spoiled. The teaching that I've done has been with teachers, and quite advanced, and I didn't need assignments.

Q: Okay, let's get to a few fun things now. I have some quick questions. This is the lightning round. Are you ready?

A: Okay.

Q: Do you have a family heirloom in your possession?

A: Because my family were immigrants, I don't have a lot, but I do have one piece of a tile, that came from my family's summer garden in China. In this garden, they actually had a glass-bottomed pavilion where they could look through the bottom at the fish. That pavilion is long gone. Some of that tiles from that pavilion, the shards were still on the ground. I have a shard.

Q: How did you get that?

A: I was in the garden with a cousin, and we saw the shards, and I just picked one up.

Q: Do you have a favorite comedian.

A: I do not have a favorite comedian. There are certainly many favorite comedians. I thought Richard Pryor was brilliant. I think that Steve Martin is brilliant. It's not like I follow comedy.

Q: Do you have a favorite philosopher?

A: I do not have a favorite philosopher. I mull over a lot of things that people have said.

Q: What kind of a quote, talisman, or decoration do you have at your work desk?

A: I've had different things at different times. One thing that I've had for quite a while now—you know Sister Wendy Becket, she said, "Use everything."

Q: What is one of the funniest or oddest reviews that you have received? Do you read reviews of your work?

A: You can say I look at them. To be honest, I don't really read them exactly.

Q: Because sometimes they get them totally wrong, and sometimes they have an insight that you didn't think of.

A: Yeah, I remember reading a review in which someone said, "There's nothing here that Margaret Cho hasn't done better"—Margaret Cho being much funnier than me. I'm trying to trim my humor down. I don't see myself as being like her. Yeah, that was kind of weird. The reviews come in in big stacks, and very typically, I thumb through. It's kind of like writing class. I see that the same criticism had come through eight times, I would definitely pay a little attention, and understand where people are coming from.

Q: Okay, just a couple more. Is this fun?

A: Yes! I'm aware that I go up at 6:30 and I needed coffee.

Q: Is there a Chinese word for which there is not a very good translation into English?

A: Oh my God, there are many Chinese words. The word that leaps to mind is guanxi (GWAN-shee). Everybody says it's "connection," but it's a much bigger word than that, and it's so fundamental to the Chinese mind set. You can translate it as "relationship." "Connections" is not a very good word, I think...Guanxi is a much warmer word. Relationship is too analytical. And I don't think any of the words that we have get at how fundamental it is to your way of being in China. It's so much more of a basic psychic thing than relationship.

Q: Let's go the other way. Is there an English or American word that doesn't translate very well into Chinese.

A: I'm sure that there are a lot. (laughs) Individualism. It means a very different thing over there.

Q: I'm not sure that I've asked enough questions about this major theme in your work, which is about one finding one's identity, and what identity is even based on, and if one has to make a new identity, how one even looks for that, how one even has a sense of that. Can I leave that question open at first, and see if you have a response to that?

A: I'm not sure that I can answer a question such as "How does one make one's identity?"

Q: Is it even important to be considering that, or just be it?

A: I think probably it's some combination of those two things. I think that it's helpful sometimes for people to realize how many messages they have from their culture about their identity. It may help them negotiate this problem, which we all have, we want to know who we are. It's maybe helpful to realize that there are a lot of Old World voices that say, you are who you were born, or you are your station, or you are your blood, or you are your parents. Then it's helpful to realize the idea that you have some inner essence, that it's your job on Earth to discover and to realize that that's a very New World idea. I don't think that I can solve the problem for anybody, but I think it's helpful for people to have some perspective on the process itself, and the voices that they often conflicting voices that they have about it. A book like "Mona" I think provides some perspective, particularly on ethnic identity and how "natural" it is. We live in a time when not to have an ethnic identity is not to be person, and there are many ideas in the world about what that means, ideas that we can consume critically or uncritically. As a writer, I would (assume) that we consume them critically.

Q: There are some strikingly weird sections of “Mona.” There are the ways in which some of the characters try on different identities. It happens a few times, and it’s disturbing: Seth in his sexual play when he acts out the thug; of course, the whole thing with Sherman; and then, not as disturbing, but still striking because it’s the third instance of it, when Mona plays her sister.

A: Right. Well, they’re young. I do think people do try on identities. I think that they find that they stick or they don’t stick. The things that they are moved to try on probably say a lot about them. You may gather from that book that I see identity as a very fluid thing, something that is very much invented. Parts of it that we think are natural are often invented or adopted. I think there’s a lot of performance involved.

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