

145 Victor Avenue  
Toronto, Ontario  
CANADA M4K 1A9

23 November 1996

Ms Iona Whishaw  
Vancouver Technical Secondary School  
2600 East Broadway  
Vancouver, B.C.  
V5M 1Y5

Dear Ms Whishaw:

Thank you for your recent letter requesting information about my background, etc.

No, do not go boil your head. I will launch into some quick answers:

**1. "... your life as a child?"**

Typical of the childhoods in Vancouver's Chinatown during the 30s and 40s, I was taken care of by the elders - both men and women - and by those with larger families who would not mind an extra child. All those Chinese parents who could work were, of course, taking any restaurant or factory shift work available; immigrant fathers often took seasonal work on the steamships, fishing boats, in canneries or lumber or shingle mills. As well, there were wealthy merchant families, and sometimes I spent the day with their caregivers. From this situation, I absorbed with the innocent writer's eyes and ears, the stories of the Depression and the war years. The elders, to entertain themselves and others, passed along their oral memories of Old China and their pioneer days in B.C.

**2. "... how did you elect to become a writer?"**

I always loved the stories told to me as a child, and when I could read stories in books, I sensed that I wanted to tell stories, too. I suspect that was the beginning of my sense as a writer, a teller of tales. Along the way, some excellent English teachers encouraged my particular gift for words. The school librarians proved invaluable, too. I was introduced to the Grimms Brothers and Hans Christian Anderson; thereafter, I became a voracious reader.

I did study creative writing at the University of B.C., but in the 60s, I felt I didn't have much to say. Further, a short career in civil rights and United Nations work, followed by a stint in advertising, and then my discovery that I loved teaching -- delayed my writing career for thirty years -- until THE JADE PEONY. The novel was actually commissioned by a publisher, Patsy Aldana. If she hadn't asked, I might still have not reached that "one day soon" and written the work.

### **3. "... themes in the book ..."**

As well as the references and mythologies directly mentioned in the novel, these are some of the archetypal stories that THE JADE PEONY parallels: Beauty and the Beast; Gogol's The Cloak; The Go-Between; Huckleberry Finn, and, of course, Romeo and Juliet. As for the many possible themes related in each episode, I trust your students will make some interesting discoveries. I do, however, have two themes that are central to the novel.

For me, the overall two themes are, first, that *love has no rules*; and through the discovery by all three narrators how Chinatown is full of secrets, that, second, *all lives are shadowed by secrets*.

As well, there are those themes related to the sense of belonging or not belonging (as in being "the other" or "the outsider"); themes related to racism, maturity, injustice, self-discovery, loyalty, faith, etc., etc. Whatever wakes up the reader to identify with each character's hopes and fears, the character's motives and insights -- therein (if I have written my stories well) exists legitimate evidence for a theme.

\* \* \*

Thank you for your questions, Ms Whishaw, and especially thank you for generating such spirited interest among your students. I can't tell you how much it means to me, as both a teacher and writer, to hear from committed and risk-taking colleagues such as yourself.

And tell me to go boil my head if I've been too long-winded. Do forgive me if I've fallen into my out-of-school habit of lecturing badly. Once a teacher, always a ....

With very best wishes to you and your students, I remain,

Sincerely,

Wayson Choy.

P.S. I enclose copies of articles and reviews for you and your students' perusal, and trust that these pages may also help answer some of your students' queries and concerns.