

A PERFECT DAY TO PUT YOUR HEAD IN THE OVEN

進烤箱的好日子

* 2025 Taipei Book Fair Award

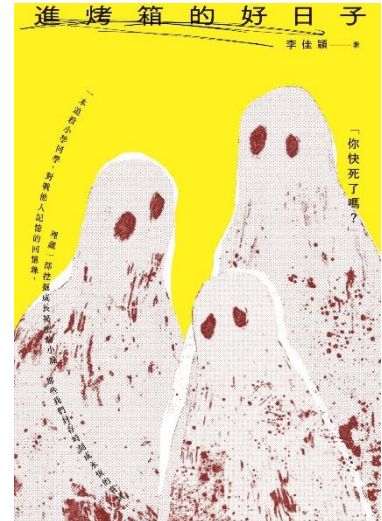
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She started writing a memoir because she couldn't write a novel, but the more she writes, the more her memoir starts to look like fiction! With self-reflection and absurdist humor, she maps the terrain between fact and fiction, coming to a new understanding of memory, literary creation, and her own past.

After struggling and failing to write a novel, Tan assumes it will be easier to write a memoir. Nothing could be further from the truth...

She starts in the fourth grade, when, without warning, her parents divorced. Though she maintained appearances as she alternated between living with her mother and father, in truth, the divorce was a horrible psychological blow which left her feeling abandoned. She did her best to find her place socially, but ended up being excluded by her peers. Under the combined impact of her parents' estrangement and her marginalization at school, she adopted the role of an observer, which, after entering a boarding school for middle school, allowed her to explore the subtle tensions in friendships and intimate relationships.

As the adult Tan records these explorations in her memoir, she begins to question the veracity of memory. She contacts former classmates for confirmation, but discovers that the process of writing has already blurred the line between reality and fiction. What she has written in her memoir has consumed her memory of the actual events. Just as American poet Sylvia Plath took her own life by placing her head in an oven, Tan has placed her personal history into the proverbial oven, unwittingly killing off her own past, and allowing something new to grow in its place.



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With her distinct brand of absurdist humor, author Lee Chia-Ying takes a deep dive into the challenges of growing up, and into the philosophical conundrums that arise when one is writing about oneself. By writing about writing, she creates a unique reading experience that invites the reader to witness both her story of growing up, and the process by which that story was born. Fans of metafiction, new literary forms, and coming-of-age stories will all find much to appreciate in this fresh and thought-provoking work of fiction.

Lee Chia-Ying 李佳穎

Lee Chia-Ying, born in Taiwan and now based in Boston, is the author of three acclaimed short story collections — *Barkless*, *47 Wanderers*, and *Mince*. Her debut novel, *A Perfect Day to Put Your Head in the Oven*, won multiple literary awards in Taiwan and has been translated into more than ten languages, including English.

A PERFECT DAY TO PUT YOUR HEAD IN THE OVEN

By Lee Chia-Ying

Translated by Lin King

Maybe I should just write a memoir instead.

The thought occurs to me as I find myself asking more questions about the nature of fiction.

I've always referred to myself as a fiction writer and harbour a good deal of skepticism toward the genre called memoir. To me, the only difference between fiction and memoir is the element of "truth": a memoirist writes about things that, to their understanding, really happened. "Truth" is the guiding principle of their vocation; they can only write what they perceive to be true. If they cannot stick to this principle – if they were perhaps to lie or to insert some made-up plot – then they are effectively breaching the sole agreement between the memoirist and the reader, and their memoir becomes, essentially, a failure. In such cases, the reader shouldn't be responsible for reinterpreting the work as fiction. A failed memoir doesn't make its writer a novelist. It just makes them a lousy memoirist.

Fiction deploys a variety of techniques for kneading together things that really happened and things that didn't, so the author is never beholden to the question of whether their work is "real". People who ask writers how much of a story is "true" are condemned to live with the inability to ever fully appreciate the wonder of fiction.

To write a memoir is to make a deal with the devil.

The success of a memoir depends on the personal charm or innate gifts of its author, and by "gifts" I mean the things that have happened to them in their lifetime. This explains the common misconception that memoirs can only be written by famous people or old people: the elderly have lived longer and have experienced more things, while the famous are usually blessed with charisma. But, in reality, anyone can write a memoir so long as they don't care whether anyone actually reads it.

The novelist Flannery O'Connor once wrote, "Anybody who has survived childhood has enough information about life to last him the rest of his days."

In this sense, a memoirist doesn't need to, and in fact *cannot* "hone their craft". What they need is an exceptional gift for recall.

I can't remember the exact moment I began writing a novel called *A Clueless Man Shakes His Thump-Thumping Head*. My document currently has 8,328 Mandarin Chinese characters,

which is about fifteen pages single-spaced and, if printed, would probably equal the length of a real estate brochure for a condo development.

The reason I've been so slow is because I've felt like a stowaway, sneaking myself inside the protagonist. By around 5,000 characters, I knew that 72.63% of the protagonist's experiences were my own. By 10,000 characters, his way of speaking, his reactions, the things he chose to observe versus the things he willfully ignored – all of it was mine. When I finally got up to 40,000 characters, I decided that if he was to be autonomous, his interior life would have to remain unknowable. I deleted all instances where he “felt”, “thought”, “decided”, “hoped”, or “knew”. I also took out “probably”, “knowingly”, “deliberately”, “unwittingly”, and any clause that followed. I then deleted all the sections where the narrator is omniscient, then all the familiar figurative language, then all the adjectives like “foolish”, “boring”, “poignant”, “authentic”. I even considered removing the word “clueless” from the title.

In the end, less than a quarter of the manuscript remained. I'm now on the verge of giving up completely. Its pages have grown more and more infuriating, like an online influencer who livestreams himself twenty-four hours a day without actually saying anything. He wakes up; he sits at the table; he lifts his chopsticks; he blinks into the mirror; in the middle of his sleep, he yells “Fuck!”.

Frankly, it's a shitty story. I'm not sure if my own life is any more interesting, but O'Connor's words do chime with me.

I still want to finish the novel someday. For the moment, though, I feel frustrated by the limitations of the third-person point of view, of circling the same drain, of trying to escape my own narrative principles but finding no new answers. What I want is a clean break from fiction.

Then I had an idea.

Since I can't seem to avoid seeping into my fictional characters, maybe what makes the most sense right now is to start something else.

I'll write a memoir instead.

*

When I was in the fourth grade, my mom and dad got divorced. They'd shown no signs of separating before then. For as long as I can remember, they were always chatty and cheery with each other. It was only on a handful of times when I'd wake up randomly during the night and find them sitting on the couch together, stacks of paper laid out on the coffee table. In those instances, I'd sensed something wasn't right in the room, but had concluded that things only felt odd because the television was off.

This might sound preposterous, but I'm completely serious when I say: until the day my parents announced their divorce, I'd never seen them argue. Not once.

At the time, I had a friend named Chou Ko-Yi who'd sometimes come to school looking visibly cranky. When I asked her what was wrong, she'd say something unbearably *adult* like: “I

didn't sleep well last night because my parents were fighting." What fourth grader would care about how much sleep they should get? "Didn't sleep well" simply meant "stayed up late", which among us kids was a form of showing off.

"How come?" I asked her, once.

"Because I was sitting at my bedroom door trying to make sure that my dad wouldn't kill my mom. I only fell asleep after they went to bed."

Her answer so exceeded my powers of comprehension that I couldn't think of anything to say.

Later on, while Chou Ko-Yi and I were playing in her room, stripping the clothes off our paper dolls, I heard her dad shouting in the living room. Chou Ko-Yi's dad spent all day at home while her mom helped out at the self-serve vegetarian restaurant next door. That was how Ko-Yi used to phrase it – "help out", as if her mom spent all day napping, eating, and watching TV, and just happened to be on a leisurely stroll when she was suddenly asked by the neighbor to mind the stove as a favor.

In hindsight, her mom was most definitely a full-time cook. Not only did she work all day, it was her income that fed their family. If anyone needed to "help out", it was Chou Ko-Yi's dad – he could've done them all a favor just by getting off his ass. Either way, whenever we ran into Chou Ko-Yi's mom, she'd always hand us some ten-dollar coins to buy cold drinks from a vending machine.

That afternoon, her dad had been lounging in their wooden armchair in the living room. Beer cans sprawled across the coffee table and the surrounding floor. Before I could so much as say Hi, Chou Ko-Yi pulled me into her room. The shouting began shortly thereafter. Chou Ko-Yi got up, and I thought she was going to lock her bedroom door, but instead she popped out her entire door handle and revealed a fist-sized hole through which we could see the living room outside. Chou Ko-Yi picked up a stuffed piglet that she'd won at a claw machine and shoved it into the door hole, immediately lowering the volume of her parents' voices. Even so, we could hear every word – there was another hole in the drywall next to her door.

This was my first time overhearing a fight between someone else's parents. You heard a lot about parents fighting, but to actually witness it in real time was about as common as meeting a sea turtle in the act of laying eggs. Adults tend to argue behind closed doors, so most people have only ever heard their own parents shout at each other; in my case, I hadn't even heard it from my own parents. Mr. Chou barked out a sequence of the dirtiest Taiwanese cusses non-stop for at least three minutes, to the point where I felt like the *motherfucking cunt fuck you fuck your mother* began to sound almost musical. Mrs. Chou cried things like, "Why don't you just die?" and "Fat ass" and "I hope you die young", then she'd screamed and screamed until there was only the thumping of heavy objects being thrown.

I looked over at Chou Ko-Yi in terror, but she only shrugged. I thought, *I'll believe anything you tell me from now on.*

My parents' disagreements took a very different form. According to them, they never fought – they *communicated*.

*

In an effort to get closer to the truth, I believe a memoirist should be virtuous enough to notify their subjects.

I had to show Chou Ko-Yi what I'd written about her to confirm she had no issue. The problem was, she and I were only in the same class for two years, third and fourth grades, and I haven't seen her since. The only friend from elementary school that I still keep in touch with is Hsu Wen-Fang, who was in my class from fifth to sixth grade. By "keep in touch", I really just mean that we have each other on Facebook.

In our school, each year had twelve homerooms, so it's entirely possible that Hsu Wen-Fang never met Chou Ko-Yi at all.

I messaged Hsu Wen-Fang on Facebook to ask whether she knew Chou Ko-Yi. To my surprise, she replied right away:

"Nope."

I considered my options. "Are you in touch with anyone else from elementary school?"

"Nope, I'm not."

There were about ten accounts named Chou Ko-Yi on Facebook, but none of the profile pictures resembled my mental image of the Chou Ko-Yi I knew. I messaged three of the users that seemed to be most active:

"Hello. Did you by any chance go to Pai Kung Elementary School?"

Another notification from Hsu Wen-Fang popped up on my screen: "What about you?"

I typed, "Me neither."

Before I hit send, a new idea sparked.

*

Hsu Wen-Fang and I were classmates in fifth and sixth grade. We also lived across from each other – or, to be precise, my home faced the backdoor of hers. Her family sold paint; her dad was always squatting by the backdoor with a paint sprayer, testing products. Turning into our alley, you could immediately smell the lacquer thinner and hear the accompanying *click, tsssst, click-click, tsssst*. Through their family, I first learned that selling paint was a livelihood.

There was a bakery that my mom and I used to drive to, and along the way there was a paint store with the sign CELEBRITY PAINTS.

For some reason, I always assumed that this was the front of Hsu Wen-Fang's home, somehow completely bypassing the fact that her backdoor was right in front of my front door whereas CELEBRITY PAINTS was a five-minute drive away. Children's imagination is often founded on ignorance. Not *total* ignorance, but the kind where you do your best to connect the

dots but find that you can't, so you end up forcing the dots to connect – ignorance stemming from the human instinct to learn.

Sometimes, it can manifest in quite poetic ways.

Hsu Wen-Fang and I had known each other long before we were placed in the same fifth grade class. We used to play together when we were in the lower grades, but she always came to my place while I rarely went to hers – her mom didn't like it when I visited. I'd intuited very early on that Hsu Wen-Fang's mom disliked me. An adult's animosity is always glaringly obvious, especially when you're a child and they don't need to show you any fake courtesy. I never knew why she disliked me. I still don't.

Hsu Wen-Fang and I were very different. She took piano lessons and wore dresses to school on the days that we didn't need to wear uniform. Her hair was always pulled back in a tight ponytail or a sleek half-updo, complete with a ribbon. This meant she always showed her full face – there were never any stray hairs tickling her cheek or obscuring her forehead. Taiwanese people refer to “perfect” oval faces as “goose-egg faces”, and whenever I hear the term, even to this day, I think of the young Hsu Wen-Fang. The shape of her face is permanently stamped onto my personal definition of the term “goose-egg face”. For a while in elementary school, whenever I had to draw a person, I'd always start with an oval, then add a widow's peak like McDonald's golden arches. As I drew, I was thinking of Hsu Wen-Fang.

She was an accomplished pianist. When I used to call her home to hang out, three out of five times, her mom would say, “Not today, Wen-Fang needs to practice.” Over time, we stopped playing together.

On the first day of fifth grade, I entered my new classroom and found Hsu Wen-Fang sitting inside. She was with a few other girls who were clearly her friends from the previous year's homeroom. I waved at her. She pretended not to see.

That summer, leading up to the fifth grade, I would say to myself every night before going to sleep: You need a metamorphosis.

I didn't mean a physical transformation, but rather that I didn't want to repeat the person I'd been in the fourth grade. It was so much *work* to be hated by other girls. In my fourth-grade class, a clique of them had formed an organization named the “Children's Association”. Hsueh Mei-Chi was their president, and during the ten-minute recess between classes, they'd hold member meetings in the girls' bathroom. Their association had just one founding principle: to stop me from joining. At first, I would badger Hsueh Mei-Chi, asking her why I was being singled out. Later, after their fiftieth members meeting on the topic of How to Most Effectively Obstruct the Bathroom Entrance with Broomsticks to prevent me from intruding, they released a scrap of paper with a list of ten reasons why I couldn't join. “TEN DEADLY SINS.”

I only remember two of the points, but I know that there were ten total because that was how I first learned the term “deadly sins”.

I went home and told my mom that I wanted to change school districts. She was lying in bed, holding the newspaper in one hand and a cigarette in the other. “Why?” “My classmates don't like me,” I said, sobbing. “Moving costs money,” she said. “We don't have money.”

As soon as she said that, I stopped crying. From that day on, I'd talk to myself before going to sleep, addressing someone or something that I never identified. I talked and talked and talked.

My faith in myself reached unprecedented heights: nobody could help me; I could only rely on myself to change. And change, I told myself, would begin that very night, under the heavy coil of my comforter, with my eyes wide open and my hands clasped tight and my lips moving in furious confession.

Then, on the first day of fifth grade, I suddenly found myself to be more mature than my classmates. I'd sprouted about ten centimeters over the vacation, too. Our homeroom teacher took to calling me "very humorous" in front of the class, and when adults start describing a child as "humorous", you know you've officially deviated from the pack. I became a sort of older-sister figure to my peers, as though I was a middle schooler who'd been held back a couple of years. My classmates took for granted that I'd get good grades (she's learned it all before, you know?), that I'd handle social interactions diplomatically (she's more mature than the rest of us), that teachers would find me humorous (only adults get adult jokes), that I'd be second-in-command when adults weren't around (when the landlord is away, you've still got to pay your rent to somebody), and that I wouldn't be a target of bullying (no campers would pick on the counselor).

Hsu Wen-Fang had her own little circle, which I was never in. My circle consisted of myself, but also encompassed the whole class, including her clique. I no longer called her to invite her over, but sometimes she'd call me to ask for clarification on homework. Once in a while, I'd see her mom heading out on a moped to deliver paint, and I'd say to her, "Hello, Mrs. Hsu." She would smile at me. Hsu Wen-Fang's dad continued his routine of testing paint with a sprayer in our alleyway. On my way home, as soon as I turned the corner, I would always catch the glare of the glossy paint on the asphalt: white, silver, blue, green.

The following summer, before the sixth grade, my mom signed me up for my first-ever stayaway camp. After three days and two nights away from home, I got off the camp's bus in front of North Exit 3 at Taipei Main Station. My mom was waiting for me. As we crossed the street, holding hands, I saw that her expression was grave.

"Hsu Wen-Fang's mom died."

"What?"

"This morning. She was hit by a truck while on her moped," she said. "Hsu Wen-Fang was sitting on their backdoor stoop when I came out. She looked like she's been crying. I asked her where her dad was and she said he was still at the hospital. I don't think she's heard the news yet."

"Then how did *you* hear?"

"Lee Wan-Chi's mom called and told me."

"How did Lee Wan-Chi's mom know?"

"She heard it from Ah-Ju at the market boutique."

As soon as I heard mention of the market, I stopped asking follow-up questions. Clearly the whole of Yi Hsin Village was already in the know.

In the car, I thought about when I'd last seen Mrs. Hsu. It was probably a few days before I'd left for summer camp, the morning that my mom asked me to go buy breakfast from the shop

on the alley corner. Mrs. Hsu had been there, too. “Did your mom ask you to come pick up breakfast? Good girl. Wen-Fang’s still in bed – I can’t even get her to wake up.” She’d been very pleasant to me ever since I stopped hanging out with Wen-Fang. I remember her breakfast order: three cups of warm soy milk, two mantou buns with egg, and fried youtiao sandwiched in shaobing flatbread.

I tried putting myself in Hsu Wen-Fang’s shoes: my mother was dead; gone; she would never appear again. I turned to the driver’s seat and looked at my mom’s profile. She wore sunglasses and, on her arms, sun-protection sleeves. I felt a warm liquid well up in the rims of my eyes, and when I blinked, a teardrop fell. I turned away and looked out the car window. Even so, as someone who could shed a tear and simply turn away, I had no real capacity to imagine or comprehend something like the forever absence of a mother.

The view outside grew increasingly familiar. We pulled to a stop at a red light.

“I think she was hit over there, up ahead,” my mom said.

I looked up. We were on the boulevard that we usually took to the bakery, and the CELEBRITY PAINTS sign was right next to us. I was old enough by then to know that CELEBRITY PAINTS couldn’t be the front door to Hsu Wen-Fang’s home, but, that afternoon, I couldn’t help but think: If only Hsu Wen-Fang had dried her tears, gotten up from the backdoor stoop, and run through her home to the storefront, she could have reached her mother before the rest of Yi Hsin Village did.

The next summer, after graduation, Hsu Wen-Fang moved away. Years later, when Facebook first started getting popular, my mom created an account and, through some connect-the-dots pathways as cryptic as the social network that led from Lee Wan-Chi’s mom to the market boutique’s Ah-Ju, I managed to find Hsu Wen-Fang. We added each other as Friends and made some small talk. But that was all. I know that she now works as a piano teacher; she knows that I work at an advertising agency.

What she doesn’t know is that I write fiction, and that I even want to write about her in my memoir.

*

Rereading the above section, I find that it has a flimsy rationale for occupying space in the memoir. What’s actually the significance of Hsu Wen-Fang and my memory of her in the grand scheme of my life? If I’d managed to contact Chou Ko-Yi right away and not had to resort to messaging Hsu Wen-Fang, would I have even included her in the memoir at all? Maybe – but I wouldn’t have framed those memories in this specific way.

This somewhat lowers the stakes for me in terms of sharing the passage with Hsu Wen-Fang. At this current moment, I’m not dwelling on the question of how I might feel to read it if I were her. This makes me sound less empathetic than I was in the sixth grade, but what I really mean is: I’ll find out how she feels about it once I show it to her. I can start the process of self-censorship after I put the thing out there and see what happens.