

Beloved life

Wayson Choy explores his close calls with death and the close friendships that helped him survive

By Robert Wiersema, The Ottawa Citizen April 5, 2009



With a little help from friends and top-notch medical care and rehabilitation, Toronto author Wayson Choy survived to write again—this time, a book chronicling his ongoing recovery.

Photograph by: J.P. Moczulski, Canwest News Service

Not Yet:

A memoir of Living and Almost Dying

By Wayson Choy

Doubleday Canada, \$27.95

Words typically used to describe living, working writers include stand-bys such as "impressive," "winning," "pedantic," "frustrating" and the like. One word not typically used, outside of the world of children's writers and writers with a cult following, is "beloved."

This descriptor is usually reserved for writers of the past who continue to make an emotional connection with their readers. Thus, Jane Austen is beloved. Sophie Kinsella? Not so much.

One of the few exceptions to this rule is Toronto writer Wayson Choy, for whom the word "beloved" fits as naturally as a warm sweater.

Why does the word fit so well? It's not his prose, which is always incandescent. And it's not the size of his oeuvre which, presently, amounts to four books (although, the fact that *The Jade Peony* and *Paper Shadows* are among those books is a conclusive argument for the value of quality over quantity). I think, ultimately, it comes down to his humanity, as reflected in both his written work and his years as a teacher and mentor for other writers. He connects, fundamentally, at both a literary and personal level.

Choy's humanity, and his deep connections to both people and the world around him, come to the fore in his new book, *Not Yet*, a harrowing, enthralling and incandescent memoir of his brushes with death in the early years of this decade.

In August of 2001, in the humidity of a Toronto summer night, Choy, then 63, suffered a severe asthma attack that was linked to "multiple cardiac events;" he was kept in a medically induced stupor for 11 days to reduce the risk of brain damage.

Choy's recounting of these events in *Not Yet*, rooted in his own memories, the accounts of the friends who sat vigil over him, and the hospital records, is at once harrowing in its immediacy and vividly thought-provoking in its implications.

Anyone who has spent time under sedation will recognize the blurry, hallucinatory quality of slipping under the surface of consciousness, the confusing welter of noises and voices, the ongoing sense of displacement that Choy deftly captures.

There is also, however, a deeper level of introspection to these passages, as Choy reckons with his memories and the voices of his ancestors, as well as introducing the friends who played key roles in his life, who made their way to his bedside. It's a tour de force of writing, confident in its ability to balance seeming contradictions: it is at once immersive

and removed, intense but thoughtful, and all rendered in a tone not quite clinical, but certainly free of histrionics and sentimentality.

Following the intensity of its opening 60 pages, *Not Yet* chronicles Choy's ongoing recovery. The attacks left him unable to write and requiring the extensive use of a physiotherapist to regain his ability to walk. Almost more significant than the physical challenges, however, were the changes necessitated by the asthma, in particular. Choy's room, for example, previously a warren of books and a cluttered, dust-collecting repository for a life of whimsical and unfocused collecting, became, in his asthmatic condition, a death-trap. A group of friends took it upon themselves to essentially remake the room for him, disposing of his collections, packing his books, replacing his furniture, while he was still in the hospital.

You might find yourself marvelling: a group of friends did that? Indeed. Under the surface narrative of Choy's collapse and recovery, much of *Not Yet* is devoted to the community of friends Choy has built around himself over the past four decades, relationships that run deeper than blood, and create a space in the world for a man who has spent much of his life searching for aspects of his self-identity.

It was, for example, his friends Karl and Maria who saved his life, noticing his difficulties breathing before he did and driving him to the hospital during his collapse. Choy, Karl and Maria have co-owned and shared a house for decades, a domestic arrangement at once unusual, but utterly fitting. It is that kind of intentional community building, of finding friends and holding them close, in whatever arrangements work best, which seems to characterize Choy's life and illuminates much of *Not Yet*.

As Choy's recovery continues, he deals candidly with his attempts to slip back into "my life as usual," despite his doctor's orders. A trip to China, to host a documentary on Confucius, presents challenges to his identity on a number of levels (as a Chinese-Canadian, and as an artist with integrity, among them), and on his return, he throws himself back into work, and into the collecting and nesting habits of his pre-attack life. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that the book comes full circle, with another attack, a second hospitalization and a moment of transcendence.

Not Yet is a powerful work, an account of a life almost lost, a questioning of how a life should be lived, and an inquiry into the role of the past and its impact on the present. It is a chronicle of finding oneself after the deepest of traumas, in the arms and eyes of friends. It is a work that blends tension and sadness with joy and contemplation. And it is a reminder, as if we needed one, of why Wayson Choy is beloved, as a writer and as a man.

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