

Death's lesson: 'Love has no rules'

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"It was clear to me that people were there," Wayson Choy explains in a quiet, meditative way. "I glimpsed them. I heard their tears. There was great comfort in that."

The celebrated Canadian author smiles weakly, his full hair combed back off his pale, long face. "But then I realized they could only come with me so far," he continues after a pause. "I had a momentary fear of that ultimate loneliness. You are the one who is dying. No one else is. But I was so comforted by the fact that there were people with me. It freed me to understand that the next step is my own. I knew how I was loved. What more did I want?"

The question slips out like a knife he didn't know he was carrying. His gentle expression changes to one of startled discovery, as he expresses, as if for the first time, what he was thinking. "I could let go," Mr. Choy says, his voice catching in his throat.

"Sorry," he murmurs, wiping a tear away from his face with one of his small, delicate hands.



'I know I am a writer because until I'm writing I don't know what I know,' Wayson Choy says. (*JENNIFER ROBERTS FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL*)



The insights he gained, while lying in a Toronto hospital bed in the late summer of 2001 after an acute asthma attack, have not faded, even after having processed the experience by writing a new book about it, *Not Yet: A Memoir of Living and Almost Dying*. Doctors put him in a medically induced coma, after inserting a ventilator to save his life. A series of three or four heart attacks followed in the next week.

"You have to remember that it didn't take courage," he points out of his ability to accept death. "I was comfortable. The drugs were just wonderful," he says impishly, smiling broadly now. "And also, I thought, 'I have paid my taxes!' and I didn't have to worry about what this [medical care] costs me or other people. Once I knew I was not alone, once I knew I was not going broke, I suddenly just thought to myself that dying is not that difficult ... I think it's the ultimate mercy."

That Mr. Choy should find the perspective with which to view his own near-death is not surprising. He has always been an outside observer, even if that means he watches himself, a human being in a struggle for life, with a detached and benevolent curiosity.

His ethnicity was what first developed his skills of observation. Born in Vancouver's Chinatown almost 70 years ago, he watched a world in which he felt he did not belong. "People marginalize you and you marginalize yourself. It is a way of keeping your place," he explains. His sexual orientation as a gay man further distanced him from how he saw the majority living. Then, after a brief career in advertising and full-time teaching, he settled into the writing world, where humanity, including one's own, becomes a movie that never ceases to confound, intrigue and delight.

A creative-writing class in 1977 with the late Carol Shields yielded a short story that later became his first novel, the award-winning *Jade Peony*. Mr. Choy was 56 when the book was published in 1995. Since then, he has not stopped writing. *Paper Shadows, A Chinatown Memoir*, in which he described how he had been adopted but did not find out until he was in his 50s, appeared in 1999. *All That Matters*, a companion novel to *Jade Peony*, was published in 2004.

If his poor health gave him a valuable human lesson about the mercy of death, it also taught him about love. As he writes at the start of *Not Yet*, he was worried about being alone when he became frail and ill. He had no children to love him. He had no romantic partner. But the people he calls his family - including the couple Karl and Marie Schweishelm, who bought a house with him in Toronto - never left his side.

"I am haunted by two themes, I realize, and in this book they become quite blatant. I was really writing about how family is who loves you regardless of religious and blood lines. The second [theme], which was more powerful for me and became more obvious in the instance of nearly dying, was that love has no rules."

Mr. Choy sighs and wobbles a bit in his seat as if the enormity of love's beauty, now wholly understood, is hard to shoulder. He explains his domestic happiness as a product of serendipity: "It just astonished me that we could just be spontaneous about it."

Mr. Schweishelm was a former student of Mr. Choy, who continues to teach part-time at Humber College in Toronto. They remained close friends, and soon after the young man introduced Mr. Choy to his future wife, the three decided to buy a house together. For more than 20 years, they have lived as a unit. Mr. Choy is the godfather to their daughter. (In the Ontario countryside, Mr. Choy also boards with another couple, whose two

children are his godchildren.) "They prove to me every day that people can live together, respect each other," he says of his two households.

Of the many conventional families he has observed, he says, "We emotionally blackmail people into a set-up in which rules suddenly take over lives and people cannot live their lives."

At his weakest, exhausted by the medical intervention and racked by hallucinations he couldn't understand, it was his unusual family of friends that called him back to life. "One said, 'Don't you dare die,' and I thought, 'Oh, I didn't think it was a dare,' and then I thought, 'I want to find out what happens next. I still want to be here.' " In his research to understand his medical ordeal, he spoke with palliative-care specialists, who explained that patients "often want permission to leave or they want to know you want them to stay."

Mr. Choy has learned that much of what he knows resides within himself and that, as a writer, he must wait for it to present itself. "I know I am a writer because until I'm writing I don't know what I know," he tells me early on in the interview. His brush with death following the asthma attack in 2001 was not his last. In 2005, he was in hospital again, in need of a quadruple bypass.

On a regimen of several pills a day and regular workouts with a trainer, he feels strong and is at work on a new novel that will tell the story of the grandmother, Poh-Poh, from *Jade Peony*, before she arrived in Canada. "I feel I am in mid-career, in my mind and in my heart," he says. "I feel that this memoir has unlocked so much more that is deeper than I thought."

Still, despite the epiphanies of his health scare, he revels in quotidian pleasures and the knowledge that while much has shifted and opened within him, little has in the life he is lucky enough to keep living. "Oprah will never call," he jokes. "I am not a drug addict. I didn't suddenly find God. I'm not religious in any traditional sense. I'm just a person who said this life is good enough, this life is quite wonderful, and I am lucky to have found it that way."

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