



A memoir of life and death

Wayson Choy recounts brush with oblivion and its effect on his personal and literary outlook

April 11, 2009

VIT WAGNER
PUBLISHING REPORTER

A casual observer would never take Wayson Choy for a man who nearly died in 2001 from a serious heart attack, who later survived another, followed by a quadruple bypass, and who now chronically suffers from high cholesterol, high blood pressure and Type 2 diabetes.

If anything, Choy looks a relative picture of health as he approaches his 70th birthday, a milestone the Vancouver-bred, Toronto-based writer is due to reach on April 20. Sitting across the table at the offices of Random House Canada, he could easily pass for a decade younger. And he has an attitude to match.

"I have things that are wrong with me and that aren't correctable, in the sense that they come with age," he says. "But I feel really good. I feel like I'm in mid-career."

This last claim isn't quite as implausible as it might sound, when you consider that Choy didn't make his publishing debut until the age of 56 with *The Jade Peony*, a much-beloved, Trillium Prize-winning novel set in Vancouver's Chinatown during the 1930s.

Choy, who for decades taught creative writing at Humber College, has also published the 1999 memoir, *Paper Shadows: A Chinatown Childhood*, followed in 2004 by *All That Matters*, a novel that shares characters from *The Jade Peony*.

"I'm encouraged by Grandma Moses," says Choy, referencing the once-famous U.S. folk artist who died in 1961 at the age of 101. "She started painting at 75 and still had a 20-year career. So maybe I still have 25 years ahead of me."

Choy's new book, *Not Yet: A Memoir of Living and Almost Dying*, is a recollection of his near-death experience and the effect the incident and its aftermath have had on his outlook. In 2001, Choy suffered asthma-related heart failure, followed by a medically induced coma and, eventually, a gradual recovery.

Affirming by definition, the story weaves together subjects and themes that have figured prominently in the author's life and work, from the existence (or not) of ghosts to his struggle for identity as a gay, Chinese-Canadian.

The existence of ghosts was an article of faith in the Vancouver Chinatown of Choy's childhood. And although it isn't a belief Choy shares, he allows that his view has become more agnostic with time. The turning point came after his 2001 collapse. Choy was entering a Vancouver restaurant when the distraught owner, an acquaintance of five years, expressed conviction that the author was being accompanied by two apparitions.

Although the episode didn't make a believer of Choy, it encouraged him to focus on the distinction between existence and perception.

"I don't see colours the way other people do," says Choy, who is colour blind, "but that doesn't mean that the colours don't exist. ... I've come to realize that even if I don't believe in ghosts it doesn't mean that other people can't see them.

"I also accept that I just don't know enough about the universe. Things have happened to me and friends of mine for which a logical explanation simply won't fit."

Choy's friends, many of whom helped him through his illness and recovery, also figure prominently in *Not Yet*. The enduring friendships he has forged provide an alternative family structure that contradicts assumptions he grew up with.

"In the old days, you were always told that you had to get married, otherwise no one would look after you when you were old," he says. "A gay man has no place in that tradition, but it would be the same if I was a straight bachelor."

Choy has always seen himself as more Canadian than Chinese, despite being urged to feel otherwise as a youth. Often told that a trip to China would reset his cultural bearings, the opposite happened when he visited China earlier this decade.

"I went to these great, wonderful temples with all this calligraphy. ...It was all foreign to me," he says. "I relate more to totem poles and billboards.

"There is this idea that I am part of a 5,000-year tradition from which I was uprooted. But I wasn't. I took root in Vancouver's Chinatown. I'm glad to know that the history of my family is traced back to an ancient civilization but my roots are here."

Making good on his mid-career boast, Choy is at work on his third novel, featuring the emigration to Canada of Poh-Poh, the grandmother from his previous books.

"It's ridiculous to say that I need to write. Writing is a choice," he says.

"As a reader, I love a book that will challenge me, startle me, frighten me and make me wonder what will happen next. It's a privilege if a book works in that way and if the right reader comes along."